

This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

Sewell's

Tales and Stories

Laneton Parsonage.

Digitized by Google

10

Digitized by Google

Liverpool School Board.

EVENING SCHOOLS, Session 1893-94.

CLASS PRIZE

FOR

Good Conduct and Efficiency.

Awarded to

Amelia Okill

of the Clint Road School.

E. R. Conway

HEAD TEACHER.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

LANETON PARSONAGE

Digitized by Google

Ballantyne Press
BALLANTYNE, HANSON AND CO.
EDINBURGH AND LONDON

Digitized by Google

LANETON PARSONAGE

BY

ELIZABETH M. SEWELL

Oh! say not, dream not, heavenly notes
To childish ears are vain,—
That the young mind at random floats,
And cannot reach the strain.

Dim or unheard the words may fall,
And yet the heaven-taught mind
May learn the sacred air, and all
The harmony unwind.

THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

NEW EDITION

LONDON
LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
1886

Digitized by Google

AC 7858

Digitized by Google

LANETON PARSONAGE.

CHAPTER I.

'MAMMA,' said little Madeline Clifford, as she looked up from the work which she had been industriously hemming for nearly a quarter of an hour, 'I want very much to ask you a question.'

'Well, my love, what is it? why should you be afraid?'

'Because, perhaps, you will think it is curious, and would rather not answer.'

'I can but say no, if I think it wrong.'

'Oh! it is not wrong, I am sure; but sometimes you tell us not to trouble ourselves about other persons' concerns; and what I wish to know has nothing really to do with me, or with any of us.'

Mrs Clifford smiled: 'Shall I tell you, Madeline,' she said, 'what you are going to ask?'

'You can't, mamma; how should you know? you cannot look at my thoughts.'

'But I can guess them, which sometimes does as well. What made you listen so much to what Mrs Mortimer and I were saying just now?'

'Oh, then, mamma, you do know: but I did not understand when I did listen; because I could not make out what Mrs Mortimer meant when she said that Lady Catharine Hyde was going to adopt Alice Lennox. What is adopting?'

'Taking her to be her own child; and having her taught, and clothed, and fed, as a mother would.'

'And will she love her?' inquired Madeline. 'I should not

Digitized by Google

care for all the eating and drinking in the world if no one loved me.'

'I have no doubt Lady Catharine will,' replied Mrs Clifford, 'because she is a very kind-hearted person; and Alice is most fortunate in having found such a friend, now that she has lost her mother.'

'Lady Catharine was very fond of Mrs Lennox, was she not, mamma?' asked Madeline.

'Yes, my dear, very; and she promised, when Mrs Lennox was dying, that Alice should live with her, and be to her as her own little girl: and the fact of her keeping her word so strictly in the one case, is a reason for believing she will do so in the other.'

'Will Alice like it?' said Madeline, quickly.

'I don't know, my dear; and she is too sorrowful now for any one to judge.'

'But, mamma, will she be Alice Lennox still?'

Mrs Clifford could not help smiling: 'Yes, my love; why should she not?'

'But if she is Lady Catharine Hyde's child, how can she be?'

'She will not be hers really, but only what is called adopted.'

'And so her name will not alter,' said Madeline. 'Persons' names do alter though, sometimes, mamma: yours was Beresford once.'

'Yes; that was my surname; I changed it when I was married; but my other name—my Christian name—I kept, and must keep always.'

'Mary, you mean,' said Madeline; 'is that your best name?'

'Yes,' replied Mrs Clifford: 'Beresford is the name I had when I was born into the world, of human parents; but Mary was the name given me when I was baptized, and made a child of God. The one you see I have lost, but the other I keep.'

'And Madeline is my best name then; but I don't remember that it is, when I am called.'

'I am afraid we are all apt to forget,' replied her mother; 'and though a great many persons have never been baptized, and yet are called by two names, that is no reason why we should think nothing of our Christian names, and of the occasion on which they were given to us.'

Madeline waited for an instant, and then said, 'So Alice will be Alice always; and yet she will seem different when she lives at the Manor.'

Digitized by Google

'She will belong to a new family,' said Mrs Clifford: 'and if Lady Catharine were to wish it very much, she might by and by take the name of Hyde besides Lennox; though I do not think this is likely. Surnames can be altered; Christian names cannot. But you must not ask me any more questions, my dear child: I have told you all I know; and I am going out.'

Madeline looked as if she would willingly have kept her mamma a few moments longer; but Mrs Clifford was gone almost before she had time to determine upon what was next to be said; and Madeline's only resource was to sit with her work in her lap, and her head resting upon her hand, while she thought upon what her mamma had said, and the sudden change which had occurred in the life of her young companion.

Madeline's meditations, however, did not last very long. They were interrupted by the sound of a child's voice pronouncing her name; and a stranger, on hearing the tone in which it was repeated, would probably have started with surprise, for the voice seemed Madeline's own. And still more, on turning to look at the little girl, who walked slowly into the room with a book in her hand, upon which her eyes were bent whilst she moved, it might almost have been supposed that two Madelines, alike in every look and feature, were present. There was the same fair complexion, the same light glossy hair, the same blue eye, the same height and size. It was, to all appearance, Madeline's second self. And if Madeline had been asked, she would have said that her twin-sister, her darling Ruth, was indeed her second self; that what one liked the other liked; what one wished for the other desired too; that they had never been separated for a single day—scarcely even for an hour; that they had learned the same lessons from one book; that they had played, and walked, and slept together, day after day, and night after night; and that without Ruth she could not imagine it possible to be happy for a moment. Ruth would have said the same: yet the two sisters were not really alike; and even in their manner and appearance, it was possible for a person who observed them carefully to discover many differences.

Madeline's voice was clear and merry; she ran about the house singing and laughing, as if her heart was too full of happiness to allow her a moment's rest. Ruth laughed and sang also; but her laugh was low, and her songs were quiet; and she was most frequently seen walking along the passage or up

Digitized by Google

the staircase, reading as she went, in the same way as she was doing when she just now came into the room. There was joyousness in Madeline's glance, and her mouth seemed formed only for smiles; but Ruth's clear, blue eye was thoughtful; and when she joined in Madeline's laugh, she was the first to become serious again, and to remember a lesson, or a piece of work, or something they had been told to do, but which they were likely to forget.

In temper they were still more different. Madeline was hasty and thoughtless, quickly put out of humour, but as quickly recovering herself. She never hesitated to confess a fault when she had committed it; but perhaps the next minute the confession was forgotten, and the offence repeated.

Ruth was said to be shy; and many persons thought her gentle and humble; for she blushed when she was reproved, never made excuses, and always bore punishment without complaining; but her mamma sometimes grieved to find, that after her little girl had done wrong, she kept away from her; and that instead of throwing her arms round her neck, as Madeline always did, and begging for forgiveness, she sat silent, reading or working, or learning her lessons; and now and then allowed hours to pass without expressing any sorrow.

Still, on the whole, Ruth was careful and attentive, and it was but seldom that Mrs Clifford had occasion to correct her; and perhaps it was from this cause that the evil in her disposition was not so easily perceived as in Madeline's. Ruth Clifford was shy, and liked to keep to herself, and not to be obliged to go into the drawing-room to speak to strangers, and she was heartily ashamed whenever she had done wrong. But it was not because she was humble that the colour rushed to her cheek when she was reproved, but because in truth she was very proud. As soon as she began to understand the difference between right and wrong, Ruth learned to think herself much better than Madeline. The servants scolded Madeline for being hasty, but they praised her because she was gentle. They complained of Madeline's thoughtlessness, but they declared that Ruth scarcely ever required to be reminded of the same thing twice. As they grew older, Madeline used to forget her lessons, but it seldom happened that Ruth was not perfect in hers; and Madeline herself, when in disgrace, would frequently cry, and wish she was half as good as her sister. Scarcely any one guessed the great defect in Ruth's character to be want

Digitized by Google

of humility, except her papa and mamma; for pride is one of those very serious faults which are often but little perceived, and therefore the more difficult to correct.

But though Madeline and Ruth Clifford, like other little girls of their age, had many faults which it required time and care to overcome, on the whole they were good children, whom every one felt inclined to love. True and open, generally speaking, in all that they did, good-natured and generous, and anxious to please their parents, no one could live with them without being interested in them.

Mr Clifford was a clergyman; he was not rich, and he had a large parish to attend to, a number of poor people to see every day, and many duties to make him anxious, and sometimes sad; but he was a man whose first wish and endeavour was to obey God, and therefore, whatever trouble he might meet with, he had a peaceful, contented mind; and when the labours of the day were over, and he could enjoy a walk or a conversation with his wife or with his children, he often said with a sincere heart that the blessings of his earthly lot were such as to overwhelm him with the sense of God's bounty. And certainly his home was placed in a scene where the beauty of nature alone must have given him enjoyment.

The parsonage of Laneton was situated at the farthest end of a little village about half a mile from the sea coast. It was a cottage, built upon a hill; rather low, and long, and standing upon a smooth piece of turf, with some pretty flower-beds in front, and a row of large elm-trees upon a grassy bank at the side. The road through the village passed it on the right, and on the left it was bordered by a thick copse and some green meadows; while, directly in front, beyond the scattered dwellings of the poor, and the trees which skirted the extensive grounds of Haseley Manor, lay a broad expanse of the blue sea, the curling waves of which broke upon a sandy beach shut in by the steep red cliffs that formed the little bay of Laneton. Laneton was but a small village, and in itself had no particular beauty, but scarcely any one passed through without admiring it. There was a peculiar air of neatness in the cottages and gardens; the flowers were bright, the windows clean, the palings well kept. No thatch torn as if on purpose to admit the rain and wind; no broken fences, or mud walls; no gates off their hinges;—it was a place which every one saw at once was cared for. Some thanks for all this were due to Lady

Digitized by Google

Catharine Hyde, the possessor of Haseley Manor, and the owner of nearly every cottage in the place; but there was gratitude of a still higher kind due to Mr Clifford. It was his goodness which had been the means of gaining an influence over the poor people, and making them more constant at church, and more attentive to their families; it was his instruction which had brought the children of his parish into such excellent order, that to belong to Laneton was a recommendation to the whole neighbourhood; whilst his constant self-denial and devotion made him spare neither time nor labour if he saw the least hope of being of use to the humblest of those committed to his care. All this trouble was shared by his wife—Mrs Clifford did not indeed teach and advise the poor in the same way as her husband, but she could and did work for them, and visit them, and tell them how they were to take care of their little ones. She helped them when they were ill, and comforted and felt for them when they were unhappy; and thus took from her husband half the labour of his heavy duties. With such parents, Madeline and Ruth had spent a very happy childhood, for they were taught to employ their time usefully, and to be contented with the blessings which God had granted them, and they had no idea that any home could be prettier, or any station in life better, than their own. They had scarcely ever been away from Laneton, and they heard little of what passed in other houses, for there were but few children in the neighbourhood, and there was only one with whom they were allowed constantly to play.

Alice Lennox was the only child of a widow lady, whose husband had been an officer in the army. Mrs Lennox was a great invalid at the time when she first came to live at Laneton, in the small white house which fronted Lady Catharine Hyde's lodge. No one seemed to know much about her except Lady Catharine herself, and her attentions never ceased. Whether it were from being lonely also, from having lost her husband and having no child to interest her; or merely from natural kindness of heart; or, as some people said, because they had been friends in years gone by, and had promised, even in their school days, that they would never forsake each other when trials should come upon them; certain it is, that Lady Catharine's affection for Mrs Lennox was very unlike that which is generally seen. Few days passed without their meeting, for scarcely any engagements were allowed to interfere with the

Digitized by Google

accustomed visits. Books, pictures, flowers, and fruit, were regularly sent from the Manor, though Mrs Lennox had nothing to offer in return but her gratitude and love; and when the illness, which had been gradually increasing for many months, at length was pronounced to be dangerous, Lady Catharine spent days and nights by the side of her invalid friend, and seemed to forget that it was possible to be weary whilst she could afford a moment's comfort to one she loved.

Mrs Lennox was fully deserving of this affection, though few praised, or spoke of her, except in pity. Only Mr Clifford often expressed to his wife his surprise at the patience with which she bore the most painful sufferings, and wished that he had been acquainted with her in the days of her health, when he might have been able, from conversation, to learn more of a character which appeared so meek and so resigned. Sometimes, also, when he returned from one of his frequent visits with a countenance of sorrow, he would say that his grief was not for her, for that she was fitted for the peace of heaven, and he could not wish to keep her from it; but that he mourned for her orphan child, and for the dreadful loss which the death of such a mother must be. It was no matter of surprise to him when Mrs Lennox had breathed her last, and her child was left without any relations who were able to protect her, to be told that it was Lady Catharine's intention to adopt Alice Lennox, and take her at once to live with her at the Manor. It seemed a natural step for one who had shown so much affection to her mother; and when the wish was mentioned to him, he could but say that it was a merciful arrangement of Providence, and he trusted it might be a source of blessing to both Lady Catharine and her little charge. The change would have been a great event to any other person, but Alice was too unhappy to understand it. When she was told that she was to leave the small house which had been her home for the last two years, and go to live at Haseley Manor, and be treated as the daughter of Lady Catharine Hyde, she only cried bitterly, and said that she would rather stay with her mamma's maid Benson; she did not like the Manor, it looked so gloomy; and Lady Catharine was not her mamma, and she did not want to go to her. A few persons wondered at the little girl's dislike to the notion, and said that it was not natural, and showed that she had no gratitude, and was very cold-hearted; but Madeline and Ruth Clifford, who had been Alice's playfellows for many months,

Digitized by Google

understood a great deal more of her real feelings. They knew that she was not insensible to Lady Catharine's kindness, though there were some things which made her feel frightened at the thoughts of living with her.

'It is really true, Ruth,' said Madeline, as she jumped up from her seat when her sister came into the room. 'Mamma says that Alice is to live at the Manor. I wish she would let me go and see her first.'

'I don't think she will want to see us to-day,' said Ruth; 'we couldn't play, you know.'

'No, not play, exactly, but I should like to talk to her, and make her tell me whether she likes going. Do you know that, perhaps, by and by, she will be called Hyde as well as Lennox?'

'Does mamma say so?' inquired Ruth, in surprise.

'Mamma says she *might* be, but she does not think she will be; but she must be Alice always.'

'Why *must?*' asked Ruth; 'why may not Alice be changed as well as Lennox?'

'Because Alice is her Christian name,' replied Madeline, 'and mamma says people keep that always.'

'I never thought before whether I had a Christian name,' said Ruth; 'but I suppose that is why we answer Ruth and Madeline, and not Clifford, when we say the catechism.'

'Yes,' said Madeline, pleased at having given her sister a new notion; 'but if you were Alice, should you like to be called Miss Hyde?'

'I don't know,' said Ruth; 'I think I should choose to have my own name.'

'I like Lennox better than Hyde, too,' said Madeline; 'but it would be such fun to have a new name: shouldn't you like to be adopted?'

'I should not like to be Lady Catharine's child,' replied Ruth.

'No, of course, not to give up one's own papa and mamma; but Alice has none now.' Ruth looked grave. 'It is very dismal, I know,' continued Madeline, her bright face becoming sad also; 'but there will be a great many pleasant things at Haseley which Alice never would have had if she had gone on living in that little, poky house. All I should dislike would be to have such a strict mamma; doesn't it sound odd?—I never can fancy Lady Catharine a mamma, can you?'

Digitized by Google

'No,' said Ruth, laughing; 'she is just like a governess.'

'So she is—a stiff, starch governess, all set up and prim, like Miss Meadows, who came here in the summer with Emma Ferrers. If I were Alice, I would call her governess.'

'No,' said Ruth; 'that would be wrong, because you know she is really so kind.'

'And mamma says, too,' continued Madeline, 'that all governesses are not prim, and that she loved one of hers very much; but she lived a great many years ago. I should like to see some more governesses, and then I could tell.' For a few moments Madeline forgot Alice Lennox, whilst endeavouring to remember exactly what Miss Meadows was like, and determining whether she would rather live with her or with Lady Catharine Hyde.

Ruth was silent likewise; but after a short pause she exclaimed, 'What I should like, would be to be as rich as if I were Lady Catharine's child when I grew up. I wouldn't live with her now, but I should like to have some great thing to look forward to.'

'That is such a long time to come,' said Madeline; 'I never can think of things that are far off.'

'Not so many years,' observed Ruth; 'we are ten now—in eight years' time we shall be eighteen; it does not seem so *very* long.'

'It does to me,' observed Madeline; 'I can't understand what it is for things to be going to happen so far off as one year; and that is a reason why I should not care to be Alice. It would be no good to have pleasure to come by and by; I should want to have it at once.'

'I daresay Alice will have some pleasures,' said Ruth; 'but I don't know that I should much enjoy them, if I had to live with that strict Lady Catharine, instead of our own dear papa and mamma.'

'I wonder whether we shall ever go and play at Haseley?' said Madeline. 'I heard Benson telling Alice it was such a beautiful place for hide and seek.'

'Lady Catharine does not like a noise,' said Ruth; 'you remember how she always kept on hushing whenever we went into the white house, and she was there. Somehow, I don't think I could play at the Manor.'

'Oh! as for that,' exclaimed Madeline, 'I can play anywhere; and I don't think Lady Catharine is cross exactly,

Digitized by Google

though she does hush so much. I dare say she will not care when there is no person ill in the house.'

'Perhaps not,' replied Ruth, as if scarcely attending to what her sister was saying; and, after thinking for some minutes, she added, 'it is the odd feeling I can't understand. It would be like playing at being her child as we play with our dolls. I don't think I should like it—no, I am sure I should not.'

'Well, I should,' said Madeline; 'it is very strange of you, Ruth, not thinking of things as I do. I don't mean, of course, that it would be pleasant going away from home; but if I could go to a new house and a new place, with papa and mamma, and you'——

'And be Lady Catharine's child all the time,' said Ruth, laughing; 'she should be your mamma, Madeline—I would not have her for mine.'

'How I long to see Alice!' said Madeline. 'I fancy she must be different, though it is such a little while ago that we were with her. Mrs Mortimer said to mamma, that she heard she was to go to the Manor to-morrow.'

'To-morrow is the funeral,' said Ruth.

'Yes, I know it is; shouldn't you like to see it?'

'No,' replied Ruth, quickly.

'Oh! why not? Cook said, that if we looked out of the nursery window we should be able to watch it all the way to the churchyard. Lady Catharine's great carriage is to be there, and Mr Mortimer is going in a carriage too;—there can be no harm in looking.'

'I don't suppose there would be any harm in it,' replied Ruth; 'but I know it would make me cry, and I think it would make you cry, too, Madeline. Don't you remember how kind Mrs Lennox was whenever we went there, and how she used to give us oranges and baked apples?'

Madeline looked a little ashamed: 'I was not thinking of Mrs Lennox,' she said, 'only about the carriages; but, Ruth, don't you think she is very happy?'

'Yes,' replied Ruth, 'yet I don't like her being gone at all the more for that; and when nobody lives at the white house, I shall hate passing by it.'

'You are always thinking of something on beyond,' said Madeline. 'I wish I could. I am sure no one would love me if they knew I wanted to see the funeral—no one but you, Ruth; but you can't help it, because we are sisters.'

Digitized by Google

'If Alice had a sister!' began Ruth.

'Yes, wouldn't it be nice for her? She asked me one day if you and I were not just like sisters to her, and I did not know what to say. I don't think we can be like sisters to anybody but ourselves—do you think we can?'

'No,' replied Ruth, earnestly; 'and papa and mamma would not wish us to be. You know they said, only last Sunday, when we were sitting in the arbour after church, that all our whole lives, if we lived ever and ever so long, there would be nobody to love us in the same way, because of no one having just the same things to remember.'

'We have quite the same,' said Madeline, 'all the way back as far as we can think.'

'Yes,' continued Ruth, 'all from that red spelling-book which uncle George gave us when we were three years old.'

'And the work-boxes,' added Madeline; 'and that time when old Roger used to dip us in the sea—and the new curtains to our bed, Ruth; only I cried, and you did not, when mamma would not let us pull them close; and, oh, so many things!' Ruth's memory was the clearer of the two, and one thing recalled another, till the principal events of their short and sunny lives had been named; and then Madeline ended, by throwing her arm round Ruth's neck, and repeating, 'Mamma says there is nothing like a sister.'

CHAPTER II.

IT was in the cool of the evening, when the lessons were all finished, that Ruth seated herself in the arbour at the bottom of the garden, from whence she could see the boats and vessels which were in the bay, and watch the fishermen mending their nets, or sauntering about on the sandy beach, or leaning against the rocks waiting for the return of their absent companions. It was Ruth's favourite spot; and she generally found great amusement in the sea and all that was connected with it; but on this day her eyes were not fixed upon the blue waves, or the white foam, or the red sandy shore; but upon the old turret-like chimneys of Haseley Manor, which were seen peeping above the trees to the right of the bay.

Digitized by Google

Whatever Ruth's thoughts might have been, they employed her so deeply, that Madeline called to her several times without receiving an answer; and at last she begged not to be interrupted, and allowed her sister to run races with Rover down the long, green walk in the kitchen garden, without feeling any wish to join her. Ruth was fond of sitting by herself, and thinking about the things which she heard and saw every day; and trying to fancy what she should be like when she was a grown-up woman. She seldom, however, spoke of her own fancies; and even her mamma often observed her grave moods, without being able to find out their cause. The person who made Ruth talk most was her papa. She had been taught to look up to him with great reverence; and when he asked her questions, it seemed wrong not to answer them, though it was often difficult to find proper words for explaining what she meant. But Mr Clifford had a sort of power of guessing what was in his little girl's mind before she had even attempted to tell him; and often repeated her very thoughts aloud in a way which made Ruth start, as if she imagined he must be one of the magicians or conjurors of whom she had sometimes read. It was in the same arbour in which Ruth was now sitting, that she had most frequently talked with her papa. Mr Clifford liked it as much, or even more than Ruth herself; since he could enjoy it not merely because the view was pleasant, but because the sea, and the sky, and the steep cliffs with their jagged edges overhanging the shore, and even the masses of sea-weed tossed to and fro by the tide, made him think of the unspeakable goodness of that Almighty God who has given so much beauty to this sinful earth.

Ruth liked these conversations almost more than any amusement, though she felt sometimes that it would be difficult to say anything in answer. She often listened silently, or only repeated yes and no, till her father had finished talking, and then ran away to tell Madeline all that he had said, and beg her to stay with her in the arbour the next evening and listen too. But perhaps the next evening came, and Mr Clifford was engaged in his study, or walking with her mamma; and Madeline thought it tiresome to wait for him, and chose to play instead; so days and even weeks passed before Ruth again had what she was accustomed to call a long talk. This evening, when the air was sultry, and the sea looked motionless, and not a leaf was stirring upon the trees, was just fitted for

Digitized by Google

sitting still. Ruth hoped her papa might perhaps come into the garden, for she had seen her mother set off for the village; and she thought, if her father was left alone, he would be the more likely to find his way to her; and thus it proved. Ruth had scarcely begun to think about the life which Alice Lennox would be likely to lead at the Manor, when her papa's hand was placed upon her shoulder: 'You are alone, my child? where is Madeline?'

'Playing with Rover in the green walk, papa; but it is so hot.'

'And you like best to sit still; but I am not sure that it is as good for you, Ruth—that is, generally; perhaps to-night there is no harm in being quiet.'

'We played last evening, and the evening before, and the evening before that,' said Ruth, 'and I don't care for it to-night; and there is not room in the walk for two to run with Rover.'

'Is that the only reason for liking to sit still, and be alone?' inquired Mr Clifford.

'Not the only one, papa. The sea looks so beautiful, and the fishing-boats are just going off; and, besides that, I was thinking about Alice Lennox.'

'Poor child!' sighed Mr Clifford; 'to-morrow will be a sad day for her.'

'Worse than to-day, papa, do you think?'

'Yes, my love; for many reasons. Some of them, perhaps, you would not quite understand, for you have never known what it is to lose any one you have loved very much; and you cannot tell how dreary and lonely everything seems, when we have laid our friends to rest in the earth, and are obliged to go back ourselves to our common duties.'

'But Alice's life will be different after to-morrow,' observed Ruth; 'for Madeline says she is to go directly to live with Lady Catharine.'

'Yes,' replied Mr Clifford, 'it will indeed be very different; but I do not think that is likely to make her less unhappy, because at first everything will be strange.'

'I was thinking of that, papa, when you came. Madeline and I were talking about it all this morning, and Madeline said she should like to be adopted.'

'And should you like it too, Ruth?'

Ruth coloured, as she generally did when she was asked any

Digitized by Google

questions about herself. 'I don't know, papa,' she said. 'We don't mean either of us, that we could bear to go away from you, because it would make us very unhappy; but only that everything would be new and'——

'And what, Ruth?' The answer was interrupted by the approach of Rover, who was quickly followed by Madeline. 'Now, Rover, down! down!' said Mr Clifford, as the huge black dog put his paws upon his knees.

Rover and I have been having such fun!' exclaimed Madeline: 'we have been running races; and he is so good; he came directly I called him, though I knew he wanted to go into the pond.'

'And papa and I have been having pleasure too,' said Ruth; 'at least I know I have.'

'Pleasure! what pleasure?' said Madeline, quickly.

'Talking pleasure,' replied Ruth; 'and I like it much better than running.'

'I shall like it too, now,' said Madeline, taking off her bonnet, and throwing it upon the ground; 'I am very tired.'

Mr Clifford took up the bonnet, and placed it upon her head; 'Prudence, Madeline, my darling; there is no surer way of taking cold than that; and I am not inclined yet to see you become ill, and perhaps die.'

'You would be as sorry to part with us as we should be to go away from you, papa,' replied Ruth.

Mr Clifford only smiled in answer; and after a few moments' silence, said, 'And yet Madeline thinks she should like to be adopted by some one else.'

'Oh, no, papa!' exclaimed Madeline, whose quick feelings were instantly touched; 'that was only when I was silly this morning; I did not really mean it.'

'But is there any harm, papa,' asked Ruth, timidly, 'in liking to have something to look forward to when one is grown up, as Alice Lennox will have, if she is to be such a great person as Lady Catharine Hyde's daughter?'

'No harm, my dear, if we look forward to the right things.' Ruth's countenance showed that she did not entirely comprehend. 'You don't know what I mean, do you, Ruth?' said Mr Clifford.

'Not quite, papa.'

'It is rather difficult to understand; but supposing I were to tell you that I had been adopted myself, and that you had both

Digitized by Google

been adopted also, and your dear mamma, and all your friends, and that we had much greater things to look forward to than any which Alice Lennox can have from merely being treated as Lady Catharine Hyde's daughter, should you believe me?' The children did not answer; but Madeline gazed wonderingly in her father's face. 'It is not the first time we have talked about it,' continued Mr Clifford: 'I think only last Sunday I heard you repeat words which spoke of it.'

'Sunday, papa?' repeated Madeline, hastily; but Ruth considered, and then said, 'In the catechism?'

Mr Clifford rested his hand fondly upon her head.

'Thank you, my child; I am sure you understand me now. What is it you say, Madeline, in the answer to the first question in the catechism, when you are asked who gave you your Christian name?' Madeline repeated the sentence; and, when she had finished, Mr Clifford said, 'Ruth, you can tell me in your own words why I have reason to declare that you and Madeline have both been adopted.'

'I can't tell, papa,' interrupted Madeline: 'I wish you would teach me all about it.'

'Then we must be grave, Madeline; and I think you are more inclined to go for another run with Rover.'

'No, please stay!' exclaimed Ruth; 'I like having you here too.'

Madeline looked rather wistfully at Rover; but he was sooner tired of play than his young mistress, and now lay with his eyes shut, enjoying the pleasant warmth of the afternoon sun. 'I would rather stay, papa; and I will try and be grave, like Ruth.'

'It is a hard matter, I know,' said Mr Clifford; 'but when we are talking about God and our blessed Saviour, we must endeavour to put away idle thoughts for the time, or else we shall do ourselves more harm than good. What I wanted to say to you both is nothing new; for you have heard a great many times that you were made at your baptism children of God, and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. Perhaps, however, you will be able to know better what this means when you have an example, as it were, before you. Alice Lennox is to be Lady Catharine Hyde's adopted child; she is to have a fortune, and to be what people call very well off in the world, when she grows up, if she is good now. It seems as if she were a very fortunate little girl, and so indeed she is; but she had a much greater

Digitized by Google

blessing given her when she was baptized; and so had you, for then you were made God's children, and were promised a home of perfect beauty and happiness in heaven, where no one can ever feel pain, or hunger, or thirst, or cold, or heat, but where you will live with God and the saints, and the holy angels for ever. There is something, however, which we must always remember, or we shall lose these great blessings. If Alice Lennox were to be very ungrateful, and to disobey Lady Catharine, do you think she would receive the same kindness as if she were to endeavour to please her?'

'No,' said Madeline; 'but I don't think Alice will like to do what Lady Catharine says, because Benson always lets her have her own way.'

'So much the worse for her,' replied Mr Clifford; 'but that would be extremely naughty in her.'

'She is naughty very often,' said Ruth.

'Perhaps she is, but I think we had better leave her faults, and think of our own. I am afraid we are all naughty very often, and far more ungrateful to God than Alice can be to Lady Catharine. And there is one great fault, Ruth, which we are much more likely to commit against God than we are against any human being. I do not suppose Alice will ever be wicked enough to forget who gave her all her blessings; but we do so constantly.'

'I don't think we do, papa,' said Madeline; 'whenever any one asks us who gave us our home, and our garden, and all our things, we always say that it was God.'

'Yes, my dear child, I daresay you do; but there is something more required than merely to say it, especially when we remember how much greater the blessings are which God gives us than any we can receive from our fellow-creatures. We are really made God's children, but Alice Lennox is only adopted. Do you know what the difference is?' Ruth thought she did, but it was rather difficult to explain; and Mr Clifford went on: 'Look at that large tree on the bank,' he said, 'see how it stretches out, and how thick the leaves are. There is a branch lying on the ground close to it; if I were to tell you to go and fasten it on to the trunk, do you think it would grow?'

Madeline laughed at the idea. 'Oh no, papa; we are not so silly as that.'

'But what would prevent it from growing? It would be like the other, and be as near the trunk: what would it want?'

Digitized by Google

'The sap,' said Ruth.

'Yes, Ruth, you are right, it would want the sap, which is constantly passing through the twigs and leaves, giving them life and beauty, and making them parts of one tree. But do you remember what was done with the pear-trees in the orchard last year?'

'Yes, papa; they were grafted.'

'Well, and what became of the grafts?'

'Oh! they are all living, and growing quite fast.'

'So, Ruth, there is a way of letting the branch of a tree into the stock of another, so as to become one with it; although no mere fastening them together will ever make them one. Now this, perhaps, will serve as an example to you of the difference between what has been done for Alice Lennox by Lady Catharine Hyde, and what has been done for us by God. Lady Catharine may adopt Alice, she may in a manner fasten her on to herself, that is, take her into her house, and treat her as her child, but she can never actually make her her own. They can never have the same relations. But when God received us at our baptism, He made us members of Christ; He joined us to our blessed Lord, as one of those living branches is joined to the trunk, by giving us His own Holy Spirit; and therefore as Jesus Christ is the Son of God, so are we also the children of God.'

'Then, papa,' said Ruth, 'we are all certain of going to heaven.'

'No, indeed, my love, very far from it; you told me that the dead bough would not grow because it had no sap in it, but that was not always the case, was it?'

'No, papa,' exclaimed Madeline; 'Thompson told me yesterday, that it died away, he did not know how—the blight destroyed it, he thought.'

'And so the blight may destroy us, my dear child; the blight of evil tempers, and vain thoughts, and idle words, until that blessed Spirit which was given us at our baptism shall have departed from us, as the sap from the dead branch; and in the eye of God we shall cease to be members of Christ, and at the day of judgment shall not be acknowledged as His children.'

Madeline seemed considering what had been said. 'I hope we shall go to heaven,' she replied.

'We all hope so,' said Mr Clifford, gravely; 'yet we are as

Digitized by Google

ungrateful for that hope, for having been made inheritors of the kingdom of heaven, as we are for having been made the members of Christ, and the children of God.'

'Inheritors means that we are to have it by and by, doesn't it, papa?' inquired Ruth.

'Yes; but suppose that instead of looking forward, we were to look back, and think of the means by which it was purchased for us.'

The children were struck by the solemnity of their father's manner. 'We should not go to heaven, if our Saviour had not died for us,' said Madeline.

'No, my dear child; assuredly we should not. It is only because He suffered for us, and bore the punishment which our sins deserved, that we have any title to the happiness of a better world. And how often do you think we love our Saviour and thank Him for it?'

'It seems so hard, dear papa,' said Madeline; 'but I will try to-morrow.'

'To-night also, my darling, I hope;' and then, after a short pause, Mr Clifford added, 'see, Madeline, how lovely the water is, with the waves all sparkling, and that broad light upon it!'

'And the sands,' exclaimed Madeline, 'they are quite shining; there is old Roger standing by his boat, just by that large rock. Ruth and I call it the white horse.'

'How well the trees in the park look too!' continued Mr Clifford. 'I don't think I ever saw them such a rich green as they are this year.'

'The garden is better than all,' added Ruth; 'mamma's geraniums are so bright, and the roses and verbenas smell so sweet.'

'Yes,' said Mr Clifford, fervently, 'it is a most beautiful world. But in that dark lane in Cottington, Madeline, where you went with me the other day to visit the poor man who had broken his leg, there was nothing like this to be seen, was there?'

'Oh no, papa; the streets were all dirty and narrow, the tops of the houses nearly touched; and don't you remember the naughty children quarrelling?'

'The poor man was in great pain,' said Mr Clifford, 'he had nothing to eat, and no one to take care of him properly; I

Digitized by Google

daresay he would like a change. There would be room for him here, if you and Ruth were to go and stay there.'

Madeline started, and looked at her father in fear. 'O papa! how could we? we should die.'

Mr Clifford was silent, and Ruth raised her eyes to see his, to see if she could discover the reason. 'Our blessed Lord did die,' he said, at length. 'The home where He dwelt, Madeline, was brighter than the sun, and more glorious than the vast blue sea. No sound of sorrow was ever heard in it, and no feeling of pain was ever endured in it. Millions of angels knelt before His throne, and worshipped Him for His unspeakable greatness, and not one amongst them had ever known a thought of sin! and in that home there was room for us—but only upon one condition—that He should leave it.'

A pause followed, until Ruth said, in a gentle voice, 'Our Saviour did leave it, papa.'

'Yes,' continued her father, 'He came upon earth, which, even in its greatest beauty, was to Him but a land of darkness; and He lived, not as we live, in comfort and peace, but in poverty and shame, amongst the sinners who hated Him. And when He had taught them all that it was good for them to know, and had cured their diseases, and helped them in their difficulties, He gave Himself up to a death of agony, to save them and us—to save you, and me, and Madeline, from the punishment due to sin.'

Again Mr Clifford was silent, and Ruth's gaze turned involuntarily to the clear sky, whilst Madeline whispered, 'It is not hard now, papa.'

'It ought not to be hard at any time, my dear,' replied her father; 'and that it is so is the greatest proof we can have of the sinfulness of our nature.'

'It would be much easier if we could see our Saviour,' said Ruth, timidly.

'And, perhaps, you think that for that reason it might be easier for Alice to love Lady Catharine for her kindness than for us to love God for His; was not that in your mind, Ruth?' Ruth looked half pleased and half frightened, as she generally did when her thoughts were read. 'It may be so,' continued Mr Clifford; 'but it is to our shame and sorrow that it should be; and when we are called to give an account of our lives to God, it will be a fearful thing to have to confess, that we have enjoyed His blessings, and yet have never been thankful for them.'

Digitized by Google

'But if we can't be?' said Madeline.

'We can pray that we may be,' replied her father, 'and we can repeat to ourselves all the good things which God has done for us. We can read the Bible, and go to church, and we can try to please our Saviour by being good-tempered, and humble, and sincere, and giving up our money for the poor, and going to visit them. If we do all this, we shall certainly in time love God with all our hearts—better, yes, far better, than we do our dearest earthly friends.' Madeline became more thoughtful than before; and as Mr Clifford rose to leave the arbour, she turned to Ruth, and said, 'I liked talking to papa to-night more than any play.'

CHAPTER III.

NEARLY a week passed by, and little was heard of Alice Lennox. On the day of the funeral she had been taken to the Manor, and since then she had been seen walking with Lady Catharine through one of the long avenues; but whether she was happy, or how she behaved, or whether Lady Catharine really treated her as she had said, like her own child, no one could find out. Mr and Mrs Clifford talked of her very often, and Madeline and Ruth always chose to walk in the road by the park to the sea-shore, in the hope of catching a glimpse of her in passing. But the people in the village talked more than the family at the parsonage, for in a country place every event is thought a great deal of; and though few of the cottagers knew anything of Alice, except from having seen her playing in the garden, or walking with her nurse, they all felt interested about her, and wished much to find out whether she was likely to be satisfied and happy in her new home. The person from whom most had been learned about the affairs of the white house, was Benson, the lady's maid, or nurse, or housekeeper—no one knew exactly what to call her, for she seemed to do everything. She was a little, bustling woman, with a quick, sharp voice, yet a very civil manner, extremely fond of finery, and a great gossip. The poor villagers thought at first that she was much too smart a person for them; and only Mrs Dawkins, who kept a good sized shop for tea, sugar, oatmeal, and other necessary things,

Digitized by Google

and who was considered a very important person, had dreamed of asking her to drink tea. But Benson soon gave her neighbours to understand that she liked going amongst them better than staying at home, and that as long as she could have a comfortable seat, and a warm cup of tea, and permission to talk, she cared for little else. From her, therefore, all that could be learned about Mrs Lennox was learnt; and a great deal more which was not at all true. Benson had only lived in the family a few months before she came to Laneton, and when she found herself at a loss in answering the questions which were put to her, made no scruple at inventing. She gave a whole history of Lady Catharine's acquaintance with Mrs Lennox, though she had only been told that it began at school. She described Mrs Lennox's marriage, though she knew nothing more than that her husband was an officer. She repeated long conversations between her mistress and Lady Catharine, not one syllable of which she had ever heard, beyond a few words which passed while she was preparing the tea, or putting the room in order. Benson's besetting sin was vanity, which showed itself generally in a love of talking and being listened to; and when persons indulge in this fault, there is no saying into what mischief it may lead them. She was not indeed aware of what she was doing, but this did not make the fault at all the less, nor did it hinder her from the painful consequences which are sure to follow it.

To the great surprise of the villagers, Alice Lennox was taken to the Manor, and Benson was left behind; it was thought at first to put a few things in order at the house, or to take care of the little property which was to be sold. But Benson did not stay at the house; it was given in charge to a woman whom Lady Catharine had known for many years; Lady Catharine's own maid packed up the few articles which were to be kept for little Alice, in remembrance of her mother; and the very morning after the funeral, when every one was expecting that Benson would call on Mrs Dawkins, and give the history of these strange doings, it was declared by two or three persons, whose word could not be doubted, that Benson, with a large trunk and a band-box, had been seen on the top of the London coach, and that she was certainly by that time many miles from Laneton. Different feelings were expressed when this news was brought. Some wondered a great deal about Benson, others pitied poor Alice, left without the only person whom she had really been fond of, except

Digitized by Google

her mamma, for amongst the many things which Benson repeated, the one she persisted in most, was the fact that little Alice could not bear the sight of Lady Catharine Hyde.

The intelligence of Benson's departure soon reached Mrs Clifford, who, though she said less, thought a great deal more of Alice than any one else, and did truly wish to know if the poor child had suffered much from the separation. She was not surprised at receiving no communication as to anything that was done. Lady Catharine Hyde had always her own peculiar way of doing everything, and no one could at all judge what was likely to be her conduct, from knowing how other persons would probably act in a similar case. Madeline and Ruth were from this circumstance separated from their little companion at the very moment when she was most likely to want them; and Mrs Clifford now and then began to think that it might be Lady Catharine's intention to put a stop to their being together for the future. One morning, however, at the beginning of the second week of Alice's removal to the Manor, just as Mrs Clifford had seated herself at the breakfast-table, and was bidding the children summon their papa from his usual saunter round the garden, Madeline perceived Lady Catharine's footman approaching the gate.

'News, news, mamma!' she exclaimed, returning quickly, and allowing Ruth to obey the orders alone, 'news of Alice! Griffiths is come from the Manor, and he has a note, I am nearly quite certain.'

'And I am nearly quite certain that you are deciding, as you generally do, rather hastily, my dear.'

Madeline was hasty, but for once she had guessed rightly. There was a note from Lady Catharine, begging that Mrs Clifford would call upon her that afternoon, if possible, and bring her little girls with her. No reason was given for the request, and Mrs Clifford, having an engagement for the day, was inclined to send an excuse; but her husband begged her not. He told her that it was an opportunity for knowing something of Alice's situation, and might be a means of being of use to her, and that Lady Catharine never wished to see any one without some good motive; it was therefore settled that as soon as the children's dinner was over, they should set off for the Manor. The lessons were not done as well as usual that morning, for Madeline thought it necessary to run often to the window to decide if it were likely to rain, and Ruth asked several times what o'clock

Digitized by Google

it was, and complained of her sum as being very hard, when in fact it was just like one she had done only the day before. Dinner too was hurried over, though Mr Clifford came in to luncheon at the same time, and generally there was nothing the children liked better than making their papa stay and talk to them till they had finished. Even before Ruth was ready, Madeline was playing with her knife and fork, and longing to leave her chair; and when at length Mrs Clifford gave permission to go, there was a race from the bottom of the stairs to the top, and a scramble to see which could be dressed the first.

A visit to the Manor was an event which had never happened before; and, notwithstanding their shyness, they were anxious to know what the place was like, and very desirous of seeing Alice. Though living in the same village, they had seen but little of Lady Catharine Hyde, only meeting her occasionally in a walk, or when she had been with Mrs Lennox; at which time the chief notice she had taken of them was to hush, as Madeline said, and tell them that they must be sent home if they did not learn to play quietly. Lady Catharine was not a pleasant person for children to be with. She was tall, thin, and stately; she moved slowly, and talked in a firm, decided way, as if sure that no one could think of differing from her. Her voice was low, but not very gentle; and her manner, which was particularly grave, often gave the idea that she was not entirely pleased at what was going on. Then her features were rather plain, and she was always dressed in black, with a widow's cap, which seemed peculiarly unsuited to anything like play; and all these trifles put together made her rather an awful person, particularly as she was known to be extremely precise in all her ways, and never to have been accustomed to children. Madeline and Ruth were afraid of Lady Catharine, and they knew that Alice was the same; and this was their reason for thinking that no one could be cheerful and happy at the Manor: but if they had been a little older, they would probably have seen that Lady Catharine Hyde was a person to be loved as well as feared; that she was in her heart kind, and considerate, and careful for every one; that she was self-denying in all her actions; and full of holy thoughts and wishes to do God's will; and they would then have learned to think more of her goodness, and less of that sternness of manner which many excellent persons acquire without being aware of it. But it was very natural that such young children should stand in awe of a lady who seemed so far above them in everything; and even the

Digitized by Google

house in which Lady Catharine lived, and the garden and park belonging to it, served to increase the feeling.

Haseley Manor was a large red brick mansion; it had seven windows in front and five at the side; a very broad flight of stone steps, with an ornamental iron railing, led up to the door; and from the top of these steps could be seen the whole length of a splendid beech-tree avenue, at the end of which was the lodge-gate. There was a large space of ground about the house, but though it was called a park, it was principally planted with trees in straight rows, and looked somewhat formal and dull; and the garden close to the house was laid out in the same style, with long walks and narrow flower-beds, divided by low box hedges, and clipped yew-trees, and the whole shut in by a high wall. This garden was kept with extreme care; scarcely a weed was to be seen in the borders, or a leaf upon the walks; and Lady Catharine Hyde's greenhouse and hothouse were considered as patterns for all the neighbourhood. Madeline and Ruth had great notions of the grandeur of everything they were to see at the Manor; and whilst they were with their mamma they thought it would be less alarming to be in Lady Catharine's presence, than when they had been left, as it were, under her care whilst playing with Alice at the white house; so that they set off for their visit in high spirits. As they drew near, however, they began to walk quietly, instead of running in and out amongst the trees. Ruth put her hand within her mamma's, from a feeling that she would be a protection; and when they stood upon the top of the steps, and the great bell was rung, even Madeline's smiles went away, and her voice almost sank into a whisper. The door was opened by a tall, gray-haired man, having a stiff, soldierlike manner, who, to Madeline's eye, looked quite like a gentleman; but she soon forgot him, in wonder at the size of the square hall into which they were admitted, and the broad oak staircase, with its carved railings and polished steps, which led to the upper rooms. Mrs Clifford and the two children followed the butler through a long passage lighted by a window of painted glass at the farther end; and then, turning to the right, the man pushed aside some folding-doors covered with green cloth, and they entered a small apartment, hung with pictures in dark frames, and containing nothing but some high-backed chairs, and one or two curiously-shaped tables. Both Madeline and Ruth were a little disappointed, but in another moment their highest expectations were satisfied: for, without

Digitized by Google

stopping, the butler opened a second door, and they were ushered into the drawing-room, in which Lady Catharine was sitting. So large a room, so beautifully furnished, with gilt chairs, and sofas covered with crimson damask, and glasses reaching from the ceiling to the floor, and inlaid cabinets ornamented with china vases and figures, they had never seen or imagined. Yet it was not a cheerful nor even a very comfortable room. There was a quaint, formal look about it. The chairs were placed in regular order against the walls; the sofas appeared as if they were never intended to be used; and the tables had no books, or work, or flowers upon them; except, indeed, the little round one covered with purple cloth, which stood in the deep bay-window by Lady Catharine's side, and on which lay one or two handsomely bound volumes, and a small rosewood work-box.

The two children sought eagerly for Alice Lennox; but they did not discover her until Lady Catharine rose, and then they perceived that Alice was seated on a stool, with her elbow resting on the window-seat, and a book before her. She looked up as soon as she heard Lady Catharine speak to Mrs Clifford, and smiled when she saw her little playfellows; but, except this, she took no notice of them, and the children almost doubted, as they watched her, whether this could be the Alice Lennox who had always been so delighted to see them, and had expressed herself so warmly. The change appeared at first to be in her deep mourning dress, at least Madeline fancied that was the only thing which could make her seem so different; but Ruth thought that her eyes were red, as if she had been crying, and she remarked a certain curl of the under lip, which was always to be observed when Alice was out of humour. Certainly either the dress, or the manner, or a little ill-temper, had made her far less pleasing than she usually was. Not that Alice had any particular beauty to boast of, but she was generally noticed as sensible-looking and well-mannered, with a very good-natured expression of face. She was nearly a year older than Ruth and Madeline, and very unlike them in appearance, for her hair and eyes were brown, and her complexion was so dark, that she had sometimes been taken for a foreigner. She was extremely quiet in all her ways when with strangers, but exactly the contrary when with those whom she knew; and her very quick, bright eye now and then had an expression which made people think she was cunning; but this was not entirely the case, for Alice had been well taught by her mamma, before she became too ill

Digitized by Google

to attend to her; and she had not yet acquired any settled bad habits, though by nature she did like to contrive means for gaining her own point, and was apt to make excuses which were not really true. She had great faults, certainly; but one thing there was in her character which gave reason to hope that she might in time improve. She could respect and admire other persons for their goodness, though she did not try to be like them; and notwithstanding her fear of Lady Catharine, she had some pleasure in being with her, because she knew that she was a great deal better than common people.

Lady Catharine having welcomed Mrs Clifford, next turned to the children; and her manner was not as stern as they had before thought it. She held their hands in hers, and stooped to kiss them; and then, as she looked at Alice, some painful thought seemed to cross her mind, for some moments passed before she again spoke to Mrs Clifford. What she said neither Madeline nor Ruth cared much to hear, for they were longing to be alone with Alice, who now came up and stood by their side, but without taking any other notice of them. Mrs Clifford wished to tell them all to go into the garden, but she did not know whether Lady Catharine would like it; and a conversation began, during which the three children sat together, not venturing even to whisper.

If this was to be their visit to the Manor, Ruth thought they might as well have stayed at home.

At last, however, most fortunately for her, a name was mentioned, which gave Lady Catharine an opportunity for bringing forward the subject she desired. Mrs Clifford alluded to Benson, and the colour mounted to Alice's cheek, while Lady Catharine drew herself up, and said, 'If you like to go into the garden, my dears, you can. Not the kitchen-garden, mind, Alice,' she continued; 'and you must not ask for any fruit; and be sure you don't gather any flowers; and, Alice,' she added, as the children reached the door, 'keep away from the fish-pond.'

Alice said 'Yes' rather quickly, and, as if thankful to be released, ran out of the room, leaving the door open, which she was immediately called upon to come back and shut. 'Now, run,' she said, when they had passed the ante-room, and the green doors were closed behind them; and, without another word, she led the way through the long passage, into another just like it, and down a few steps into a small stone hall, which

Digitized by Google

opened upon the garden. Madeline and Ruth followed in delight. To have Alice all to themselves was a pleasure they had not ventured to expect; but they were nearly breathless before Alice stopped, so quickly she ran along the broad walk and the raised terrace at the end, till she reached a small building with a porch supported by two pillars, round which clustered roses, and honeysuckles, and clematis. Within this porch was a neat, little room, containing only a common table and some rough chairs; in one of which Alice seated herself, and, catching hold of Ruth's dress, exclaimed, 'I am so glad you are come!—kiss me, Ruth, do!'

'Why didn't you kiss us just now?' said Madeline; 'I thought you were cross.'

'How could I? I was afraid,' replied Alice, 'Lady Catharine would have said it was odd.'

'Lady Catharine! but I thought she was to be your'——

'Hush! Madeline,' interrupted Ruth. 'Alice, dear, do you like it?'

'Like it—like what?—like being here?—no, and I never shall.'

'But what do you do?—have you many lessons?—is Lady Catharine strict?' inquired Madeline.

'It 's not the lessons,' continued Alice; 'I don't care for them.'

'But you want some one to play with, don't you?' said Ruth; 'Madeline and I knew you would.' Poor Alice leaned her head upon the table, and sobbed. 'Don't cry so,' said Madeline, putting her arm round her neck; 'we will ask mamma to let us come and see you very often, and it won't be so bad by and by.'

Alice shook her head, and exclaimed, almost passionately, 'It must be just as bad; they won't let me see Benson—and I can talk to Benson, and I love her; but I don't love any one else.'

Ruth drew back a little vexed. 'Then it is no use for us to come and see you,' she said.

'O Ruth, how foolish!' exclaimed Madeline. 'Don't mind, Alice, we will come whenever we can; but why won't they let you see Benson?'

'I don't know,' replied Alice, becoming a little more composed; 'Lady Catharine says she teaches me wrong things, and Marsham thinks she tells stories; but I don't care for all that.'

Digitized by Google

'Is Benson gone quite away?' asked Ruth.

'Yes; the very day I came, Lady Catharine made me say good-bye—and Benson cried so much; but she will come back again, I know, for she said she would.'

'That will be no good to you, if you are not allowed to be with her,' said Madeline.

'But I shall see her, for she told me just before she went, that she should come back to Laneton to live; she is to help Mrs Dyer, work, make caps and things, and she will find some way of seeing me.'

'Well, I hope she will,' said Madeline, without considering whether what she was saying was right. 'I can't bear to see you cry, Alice; but should you like Lady Catharine if she was kinder about Benson?'

'I should like her better than Marsham,' replied Alice; 'I can't bear her; Lady Catharine tells me stories sometimes, and she gave me some sugar-plums yesterday; but Marsham never gives me anything.'

'And does Marsham put you to bed, and help you to dress, like Benson?' inquired Ruth.

'Oh no, Lady Catharine says I must learn to do what I want myself; so Marsham only fastens my frock. I don't care about it at all in the day time, but it makes me cry very much at night. I want my own dear mamma back again, and I think Lady Catharine wants her too.' And Alice cried again.

'But about going to bed,' said Ruth, trying to divert her thoughts; 'do you sleep in a room alone?'

'Yes, a little sort of closet, inside Lady Catharine's bedroom; she comes to kiss me every night.'

'Then she loves you very much,' said Madeline.

Alice looked up suddenly, and dashing her hand across her eyes, and trying to smile, she answered, 'I like her now and then, when she talks kindly, and doesn't look so tall.'

'Does she "hush" now?' inquired Madeline.

'Sometimes, a little. 'I don't run about here as I did at home; but she makes a great many rules. I am forced to get up and be dressed by half-past seven; and she is so particular about putting things away—and then I must never go into the kitchen-garden or the greenhouse, and must not run upon the green walks—and I am obliged always to go directly I am called.'

'So are we,' said Madeline.

Digitized by Google

'Yes, but I am sure your papa and mamma never look as Lady Catharine does, if you stay a few minutes longer; and you are able to go wherever you like all over the house.'

'And so are you too, I suppose,' said Ruth.

'No, indeed, I am not; there is one whole set of rooms which I am never allowed to go into. Look, do you see? just behind the evergreens and the large yew-tree.'

'Where those three windows are?' said Ruth.

'Yes, and there are some others looking out into the servants' court; Anne the housemaid told me. I do so want to see what is in them.'

'I daresay you will by and by,' observed Madeline, 'when you grow older.'

'I don't know; I try to peep through the key-hole now, but I can see nothing but a dark passage.'

'But if the door is locked, it is just the same to you as if there were no rooms,' said Ruth.

'No, indeed, it is not. I should not think about them if they were not there; but when I look at the windows, I can't help longing to go in; and, besides, the door is not always locked.'

'Would Lady Catharine be very angry if you were to do anything she told you not?' asked Madeline.

The question seemed to bring back something disagreeable to Alice's mind; for the curl of the lip, which Ruth had noticed when she first saw her, was again visible. 'Wouldn't she be angry!' she exclaimed. 'If you had only heard what she said to me this morning!—that if I was her child, I must do exactly, in all things, what she wished. It was because I wanted Benson that she talked so; and she told me that I must give up thinking about it; and that I must believe her when she said that it was better for me not to be with Benson; and then she began again about going into those rooms; and at last she declared that if she ever found me there, she would send me away to school.'

'And do you really think she would?' asked Ruth.

'Yes, indeed; but I don't know that I should much mind. I don't seem to mind anything now.'

'Only you will like having us to play with,' said Ruth.

Alice did not answer, for her thoughts were wandering back to her own mamma and the white house; and before Ruth had time to repeat her words, the sound of a little bell reached them.

Digitized by Google

'That is for us!' exclaimed Alice; and she sprang from her seat.

'O Alice! one moment,' said Madeline, catching hold of her frock; 'when shall you come and see us?'

'I can't tell; you must ask for me yourselves; don't keep me now.'

'You never used to care about waiting,' said Madeline.

'No, I know I did not; but Lady Catharine will be angry.'

'I should not care for making her angry if she is so cross,' replied Madeline.

Alice's foot was on the step of the doorway; but she stopped, and, turning round, said, 'I do care for making her angry sometimes; and so would you too, if you were me;' and she ran towards the house followed by Madeline. Ruth waited for an instant behind, feeling quite puzzled by all that had been said, and as much at a loss as ever to understand whether Alice was likely to be happy at Haseley Manor.

The children did not go into the drawing-room again, for Lady Catharine and Mrs Clifford met them in the passage. Alice became stiff and quiet; but her face brightened when Lady Catharine, looking at her kindly, said, 'that Mrs Clifford had promised that her little playfellows should often come and see her;' and she ventured to whisper to Ruth, at parting, that she hoped they would ask their mamma to bring them again very soon.

CHAPTER IV.

THERE was much for Madeline and Ruth to talk about when they were again alone with their mamma. They felt certain she could tell them more about Alice than they had learned themselves, as it was only natural to suppose that Lady Catharine had said a great deal about her, and they immediately began asking questions: but Mrs Clifford silenced them by saying, that she never repeated what was mentioned to her in private conversation, and after this they knew it would be in vain to try to find out anything. They consoled themselves, however, by detailing all that had passed in the garden, and asking their mamma's opinion as to the kind of life which Alice seemed to lead. Ruth was especially struck with the difference between the constant restraint which Alice was now

Digitized by Google

obliged to bear and the freedom she had enjoyed at her own home; and Madeline thought more of the longing which she felt certain she should have to explore the rooms which Lady Catharine had forbidden to be entered; whilst both of them pitied Alice extremely for having to part from Benson, and declared that Lady Catharine must be very hard-hearted. Mrs Clifford told them that whilst they were so young they had better not attempt to judge of the actions of grown-up people, as they frequently had some good motive which they did not think it right to explain. As to Benson, she had been very kind to Alice, but it was certain that she had taught her many wrong things; and Lady Catharine could not do better than place Alice out of the reach of a person who would be likely to lead her into mischief.

The answer satisfied Madeline, but not Ruth. The more she thought about it, the more sad it seemed that Alice should be thus almost taken away from everything which had before given her pleasure, and be removed to a new home amongst strangers: she recollected her tears, and the sorrowful tone in which she had said that she wanted her own dear mamma back again, until at last her own heart grew heavy, and she felt as if she could almost sit down and cry too. As the evening closed in, the weather became gloomy, and Ruth's spirits were more and more depressed. Instead of running in the garden she was obliged to stay in the house, for the sky was of a thick, dull gray, and the rain pattered cheerlessly against the windows. Poor Rover came and looked into the room, but found no one inclined to join him in a game of play; and he shook his shaggy head in disappointment, and slunk back to his kennel. Generally speaking, Ruth managed to occupy herself very well within doors, and sometimes even preferred it to going out; but this wet evening came when she was not prepared for it, and she could not so easily overcome vexation as Madeline, who, when she saw it begin to rain, provided herself with a puzzle and a book, and made no complaints to any one.

'The school children will have a wet walk, I am afraid,' said Mrs Clifford, as her husband came into the room.

'What school children, mamma?' inquired Ruth; 'what are they all coming for?'

'Not all, my dear,' said Mr Clifford; 'only the first class. You know they generally do come to me on a Wednesday evening.'

Digitized by Google

'Oh yes, I forgot; but, papa, I wish you would let me hear what you say to them.'

'It would not interest you much, my dear; you would only listen to a great many things which you know; and if there was anything new, probably you would not understand it.'

'But, papa, I should like it,' said Ruth, glad of any excuse for something to occupy her thoughts when she was uncomfortable. 'Will you just let me sit in the room; I won't speak or interrupt.'

'And me too, please, papa,' said Madeline, leaving her seat, and in her hurry throwing the puzzle to the ground.

Mr Clifford laughed at this sudden fancy, but made no objection; and a few minutes afterwards the two children were in their papa's study, each with a piece of work in her hand, waiting the arrival of the first class of the village school. 'What will they say to-night, papa?' asked Madeline: 'anything that we know?'

'One of the Psalms, and the Catechism,' replied Mr Clifford; 'and then I shall try and explain any parts which may be difficult.'

'As you explained to us, the other night, that first question,' said Ruth; 'but, papa, they won't be able to understand it all as well as we do, because you cannot talk to them about Alice Lennox.'

'No; but I may give them some other example, which may serve as well?'

'What you said came into my head this morning at the Manor,' said Ruth, 'when we sat quiet in the drawing-room, and mamma was talking to Lady Catharine; but I think now, papa, that it will be harder for Alice to love Lady Catharine than for us to love God, because Alice has so many things to give up, and we have not.'

'Nothing, Ruth?' asked Mr Clifford, laying down the book which he held in his hand.

'Nothing that I can remember, papa.'

'We will ask the school children presently,' continued Mr Clifford; 'they are older than you, and probably will be able to answer better.' Ruth's face flushed, and she bent her eyes upon the ground; for her pride was hurt in having it supposed that the children of the village could answer any questions better than herself. Mr Clifford went on reading; and Madeline, who was quick in seeing when her sister was vexed, stole gently to

Digitized by Google

her side, and gave her a kiss. Ruth remained in the same position for several minutes, trying to find out what her papa meant; not so much because she cared to know, as because she did not like to appear ignorant. Presently the tread of footsteps was heard in the passage, followed by a short knock, and Mr Clifford, opening the door, admitted the six little girls who were come for their weekly instruction. Madeline looked up, and smiled, and nodded, and asked two of them how their mothers were; but Ruth took no notice. She had a knot in her thread, and it seemed as if she could think of nothing but how to undo it. Mr Clifford looked towards her, and became rather thoughtful, but he said nothing; and after a short delay, the class repeated the thirty-fourth psalm. Ruth observed all that went on, and was forced to own that she could not have done better herself; but she had no notion that they could answer her papa's questions, and was annoyed at the idea of poor children, who were dressed shabbily, and had learned neither French nor music, being put in comparison with her. Madeline, too, looked up from her work, and drew her chair nearer to a little pale child, not much bigger than herself, with the intention of prompting her if required; but no such help was necessary. Margaret Dawson had been at school since she was six years old, and from ill-health had been obliged to spend much of her time in-doors, where she had nothing to amuse her except her work and a few books; and from early instruction, and strict attention, she was as well-informed upon all the important points of religion as many of the best educated amongst her superiors in rank. She knew well what was meant by the great gift bestowed upon Christians in their baptism; she understood how awful a blessing it was to have been made 'a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven;' and when Mr Clifford asked her the same sort of question which he had put to Ruth—as to what things persons were obliged to give up when they were admitted into the catholic church of Christ, she answered at once—'That they were to renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanities of this wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh.'

'The children knew more than you expected, Ruth, did they not?' said Mr Clifford, when the class was dismissed.

Ruth said 'Yes' in her usual quiet tone, and taking up her work was going to leave the room.

'You are in a great hurry to run away,' said her papa: 'I

Digitized by Google

thought you would have wished to stay and talk a little with me.'

'I understand about giving things up now, papa,' replied Ruth; 'it is in the second question in the catechism.'

'You understand because little Margaret Dawson told you,' said Mr Clifford, gravely.

'I don't know,' replied Ruth; and again she seemed anxious to go.

'Not now, my dear child,' said Mr Clifford, drawing her towards him, and making her stand by his side: 'Madeline may go if she likes it, but you must stay a little longer.' Madeline was curious, but she did not venture to ask any questions, and went away. Ruth felt that her papa perceived what was passing in her mind, and she did not dare look in his face. Mr Clifford waited to see if she would be inclined to speak, and then said, 'Is it really true, Ruth, that you do not know how you learned the answer to my question?' Ruth was silent. 'Or,' continued Mr Clifford, 'is it that you are too proud to confess it?—that you do not like to own that one of the village children was able to answer better than yourself?'

'I could have told when she did, papa,' said Ruth: 'I thought about it just before she spoke.'

'But you could not have done so at first—which shows that Margaret Dawson was quicker at understanding than yourself.'

'You did not ask her the same question, papa,' replied Ruth.

Mr Clifford looked extremely distressed. 'This is not honest in you, Ruth,' he said; 'it is trying to escape from confessing your ignorance by saying what you know is not strictly true. I did ask Margaret the same question, though I put it in different words; and now I will ask it you again: "What is it we are all required to renounce, or give up, when we are made by baptism members of Christ's holy catholic church?"' Ruth repeated the answer. 'And what is meant by renouncing the works of the devil?'

'Giving up naughty things,' replied Ruth.

'And what are the naughty things which children are most often tempted to do?' Ruth twisted the thread of her work, and did not appear willing to speak. 'I will tell you,' continued Mr Clifford: 'lying is one; and selfishness is a second; and ill-temper, and envy, and disobedience, are others, besides many more which I need not name now; but I do not believe that your great temptation, my dear Ruth, lies in any one of these things. I think you have in a degree broken the promise

Digitized by Google

of your baptism within the last quarter of an hour— that perhaps you are breaking it now; but it is not by ill-temper, or disobedience—will you think, and tell me how?' Still Ruth hesitated. 'I cannot see your thoughts,' continued Mr Clifford, 'but if I were able to do it, should I not have discovered just now that you considered yourself very superior to the school children; that you were proud of having had more instruction, and considered it impossible that they could know anything as well as yourself? and is not pride one of the works of the devil which you have promised to renounce?'

'I did not know I was proud, papa,' murmured Ruth.

'Very likely not,' replied her father, 'the fault is one of the last which we are likely to see or own; but there is a story told us in the Bible of two men—one proud, and the other humble—when you have heard it, perhaps you will be more able to see which of the two you are like. The words are our blessed Lord's: He says, "Two men went up into the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself: God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me, a sinner." We will venture to change these words, and suppose them to be, "God, I thank Thee, that I am not as these children are, poor, and dull, and ignorant. I am clever in reading, and quick in remembering"'——

'Papa, papa!' interrupted Ruth.

'You are shocked, my dearest child,' said Mr Clifford, 'and so am I, but there is One who must be infinitely more shocked—the God who knows all your blindness, and sinfulness, and sees that you, notwithstanding, boast to yourself of wisdom. Do you think your thoughts have appeared to Him like the humble thoughts of His children?' Ruth's eyes glistened, and the work dropped from her hand. 'I need not say to you,' continued Mr Clifford, 'that the reason I am speaking seriously upon this subject, is not because you could not answer me. It signifies little whether you are clever, and able to reply to anything which may be asked you; but it signifies a great deal that you should be humble, because without humility no one can enter into heaven.' Ruth for the moment did feel humble, and,

Digitized by Google

scarcely daring to raise her eyes, asked to be forgiven. 'And is my forgiveness all you want?' said Mr Clifford, as he kissed her fondly; 'can I keep you from being proud another time?'

Ruth blushed, and then said, 'she would remember at night in her prayers.'

'And not at night only, but at once,' continued her father: 'we may neither of us live till night; and if, besides asking God's pardon, you like to show me that you are really wishing to be humble, you can do it by thinking whether there is anything else in the question we have been talking about, which you do not quite understand; but you must go away now, because I am busy.' Ruth left the room, and instead of going to play with her sister, spent the next ten minutes alone, reading over the catechism, and asking God to give her a humble spirit, that she might not be tempted again to forget the promise of her baptism.

CHAPTER V.

RUTH'S wishes were very sincere, and for several days she really did try to remember what her papa had said; but no fault can be cured without trouble, especially one which is hidden in our hearts like pride. Ruth was indolent, and did not watch herself, and, moreover, she soon forgot that it was necessary to seek assistance from God. When her papa spoke to her, she went directly and prayed against her fault, because she was told to do it; but she did not continue doing so every night and morning. Generally, she omitted what she ought to have asked, till her prayers were ended, and then she put off doing it till the next opportunity; and thus, though she formed very good resolutions, she was not able to keep them, since, if the wisest of men cannot make themselves good by their own efforts, still less can children. Ruth's pride, therefore, was even a greater difficulty than Madeline's thoughtlessness; and though sometimes, when her sister was complaining of the trouble of being good, Ruth's conscience smote her because she did not try more earnestly herself, she used more frequently to indulge her self-conceit, and to join in condemning Madeline's conduct, without inquiring into her own.

Digitized by Google

Three weeks went by, and Alice Lennox was kept at the Manor—like a prisoner, the children said—for she was not seen beyond the gates, except when she went to church on a Sunday and in the week days, and then she walked demurely by Lady Catharine's side, and never noticed her former companions, except by a little nod, if they happened to meet in the churchyard or the road. Once they had been asked to drink tea, and they were in high spirits at the idea of going; but Lady Catharine was suffering from a bad headache when the evening came, and wrote to put them off, and they had not been invited since. Madeline and her sister began to despair of ever seeing Alice, but Mr Clifford assured them that this was not at all Lady Catharine's wish; and in the course of the next week a second invitation came. It was accepted directly, and at four o'clock (the time particularly mentioned in the note) the two little girls were sent to the Manor under the care of a servant. They were shown into the drawing-room, but to their surprise no one was there. The room, in other respects, looked just as it had done at their first visit, except that the rosewood workbox was shut instead of open, and that there were no signs of any one having occupied the apartment that day. The two children waited for several minutes before any one came to them. The house seemed perfectly empty, and they could hear nothing but the ticking of the handsome, old clock, which was placed in a recess in the ante-room. Madeline began to think that what Ruth had once said was true, and that it would be very difficult to play at the Manor. Presently, the quick shutting of a door told them that some one was approaching; then a sharp voice called out to Miss Alice, 'to put her books up;' and directly afterwards, a heavy footstep sounded along the passage; and when the drawing-room door opened, there appeared, not Lady Catharine, but her maid Marsham, a prim, plain-looking woman about forty years of age.

Now Marsham was in reality as excellent a person as Lady Catharine, but she was yet more severe in her manner; and when she smiled at the two little girls, and told them to follow her, it was with a sort of grim good-nature, which showed that she was not in the habit of smiling upon every one. 'Lady Catharine is gone out, young ladies,' she said, as she walked with a solemn step up the great staircase, 'but she hopes you and Miss Alice will play together till she comes back; and you are to drink tea at six o'clock. Perhaps you had better take

Digitized by Google

your bonnets off before you go into the study.' The study sounded rather awful, for Madeline and Ruth always called their room the school-room; and Ruth, who had wished to go into the garden, felt disappointed. They passed along an open gallery, from which they could look down into the hall below, and were just going into a bedroom, when an opposite door opened, and Alice's bright face peeped out. Marsham turned quickly round: 'Miss Alice, you'll be pleased to put that room tidy;' and the door was immediately shut. Ruth could not help wondering at Alice's obedience, when she remembered how she used to have her own way with Benson; but as she watched Marsham's manner, she was obliged to own that it would require a good deal of boldness to neglect anything which such a person ordered. When the children were ready, Marsham opened a different door from that by which they had entered, and showed them into another apartment, much smaller, and without any bed in it, and fitted up so prettily and comfortably, that they both longed to stop and examine everything attentively; but Marsham carelessly said, 'Miss Lennox's dressing-room,' and then, passing along, led them into the study. It was of a moderate size, lighted by two large sash windows with deep window-seats. The walls were panelled, and ornamented by a few pictures of scenes from English history. A map of Europe hung over the fire-place, and a pair of globes stood in two of the corners. In the middle was a round table covered with a green cloth, upon which were placed a large, bronze ink-stand, a writing-desk, and some copy-books; and at the lower end was an old-fashioned, carved, mahogany book-case—the upper shelves filled by neatly arranged well-bound volumes, and the lower given up for Alice's school-books, which were at that instant in anything but proper order. A few handsome chairs, and one with a remarkably straight high back; a walnut-tree cabinet, with open brass wire doors, lined with green silk; a large clock, and a faded Turkey carpet, completed the furniture of the room. Ruth felt that it was a study, and was more certain than ever that no one could play or be merry at the Manor. Alice, however, did not appear to be of the same opinion; she was seated on the floor by the book-case when they came in, her lap filled with books, and a heap lying on the ground beside her; but all were thrown down as Madeline and Ruth appeared, and her smile and welcome were very like what they had been when she lived at the white house.

Digitized by Google

'Now don't get into mischief, that's all,' said Marsham; 'mind, Miss Alice, you don't go down-stairs.' Alice said 'very well,' in a humble tone, and Marsham went away.

'We can go to play when I have put the books up,' said Alice, turning again to her employment; 'won't you help me?'

'What a number!' exclaimed Madeline, as she knelt down to be near the lower shelf; 'you don't learn out of them all, do you?'

'No,' replied Alice, laughing; 'but I am to do it by and by, Lady Catharine says, and such a heap of lessons I have now every day—more a great deal than you.'

'It is so strange,' said Ruth, who stood by, thinking; 'you don't seem to mind it, Alice.'

'Yes, but I do, I hate it sometimes; but it is all regular, and I think I like that; and Lady Catharine says I get on, and she looks pleased. I don't want to talk about lessons now, though; just give me those French books, Madeline, and then we shall have done; and you shall come and see my dressing-room.' The books were soon arranged, but not carelessly, as would have been the case some months before. Alice took pains that every one should be in its proper place, and even brought a duster from a drawer to wipe one which required it; and at last, after casting a satisfied glance at the result of her labours, opened the door into the dressing-room. 'It is all my own,' she said, as she pointed to the neat book-shelves, and the china inkstand, and the pretty little cabinet in which her special treasures were kept; 'for you know,' she added with some hesitation, 'I am like Lady Catharine's daughter now, so it is fit I should have such things.'

'No,' said Ruth, rather abruptly, 'you are not like Lady Catharine's daughter, and papa says you never can be.'

'Why not?' inquired Alice, quickly; 'who is to prevent me?'

'But you can't be—it is impossible,' persisted Ruth; 'you can never have the same relations.'

'Oh! as to that,' replied Alice, 'I don't want them. Lady Catharine says I am her child, and I shall have all sorts of fine things when I grow up; I shall be much richer than you.'

'I would not change with you,' said Ruth: but Madeline said nothing.

Alice felt a little provoked at Ruth's indifference. 'Look here,' she said, opening some drawers; 'these are all my clothes —frocks, and capes, and ribbons; don't they look pretty?'

Digitized by Google

'Yes, very,' said Ruth, quietly; 'but, Alice, papa told me that wearing fine dresses had something to do with pomps and vanities; and that it was wrong. He said so one evening when I asked him what pomps and vanities meant.'

'No, but indeed, Ruth, it can't be wrong,' said Madeline; 'because we have our best frocks on now.'

'I forget,' answered Ruth, looking a little puzzled; 'but I know he did say something about it.'

'Never mind!' exclaimed Alice; 'what does it signify?'

'It does signify,' continued Ruth; 'because I don't like forgetting.' Alice seemed rather surprised; and, turning away, called Madeline to come and admire her beautiful sashes; and she spread them out upon the table, whilst Ruth stood apart by the window. 'I have it!' exclaimed Ruth, at length: 'he said that it was not naughty to like what we have if it was grand or pretty, but that we ought not to feel proud about it, and think ourselves better than others; and he wouldn't like you, Alice, to talk about being richer than us.'

'I can't help it,' said Alice, 'if it is true.'

'But you boasted,' said Ruth.

'And you would like to be rich, I know; so there is not much difference.'

Ruth coloured, and was going to reply, when Madeline exclaimed—'Papa scolded one of the girls at the school the other day, about pomps and vanities; don't you remember, Ruth?'

'Hester Morris, wasn't it?' said Ruth.

'Yes; do you know, Alice, she spent all her money in buying a new ribbon, when her father and mother had no meat for dinner.'

'That was wrong, certainly,' said Alice.

'Yes; and papa talked to us a great deal besides; it was one evening when we went down to the shore; but I forget it all now.'

'I remember what he said,' continued Ruth: 'he told us we ought not to wish for anything more than we have; and that we ought to be quite willing to be poor; and not to want to have fine names, and to have people thinking a great deal about us; so, Alice, you will be very wrong indeed if you care about those things when you grow up.'

'And he said that sinful lusts of the flesh meant greediness for us,' added Madeline.

'Well!' exclaimed Alice, growing impatient at having what

Digitized by Google

she considered a lecture, 'I can't be greedy; Lady Catharine won't let me have anything except at dinner-time—I mean lozenges and sweet things, as Benson did.'

'I thought you said, last time we were here, that she gave you some sugar-plums,' observed Ruth.

'Oh yes! just that once; but she has never done it since.'

'Then you are not as well off as we are,' said Madeline, opening a black silk bag which hung on her arm: 'see here! they are bonbons—real French bonbons, which our aunt Wilson sent us; and we thought you would like some.'

'Oh, what beauties!' exclaimed Alice; and her eyes sparkled with delight: 'all silver, and gold, and pink, and blue, and green I never saw any so pretty.'

'Madeline and I are going to keep some of ours to look at,' said Ruth: 'it seems a pity to tear them.'

'I don't see that,' replied Alice; 'they are made to be eaten. This blue one is chocolate, I am sure: don't you both like chocolate very much?'

'No, not very much,' answered Madeline; 'I don't, at least. All those I have put by are chocolate, I think.'

'Dear me! then you don't care for them. I wish you would let me have them: and I am so much obliged to you for these.'

Alice immediately began eating the bonbons; and Ruth was uncomfortable, fearing they might have done wrong in giving them. 'I thought Lady Catharine did not like you to have sugar-plums and things,' she said.

'Oh, that is all nonsense! they never do me any harm; and Benson bought me heaps: besides, these are different—they are bonbons; so do, Madeline, dear, give me the others.' Madeline pretended not to hear, for she was not inclined to sacrifice her treasures; she thought them as valuable to be looked at, as Alice did to be eaten; and in an awkward manner she began turning over the coloured sashes. Alice, however, was not to be easily diverted from her wishes; the more bonbons she had, the more she wanted; and after again warmly expressing her thanks for the present she had received, she once more returned to the charge: 'You know, Madeline, I don't want to do anything you dislike; but if you are not fond of chocolate, they can be no good to you.'

'Yes, but they can be,' persisted Madeline, 'if it is my pleasure to look at them.'

'Besides, Alice,' interrupted Ruth, 'you know Lady Catharine would not like it.'

Digitized by Google

'And it is being greedy,' said Madeline, delighted to find support from her sister; 'and if papa were here, he would talk to you a great deal about not being greedy.'

Alice looked angry. 'No, it's not being greedy!' she said: 'I don't want to take them from you, if you can eat them yourself; but you don't care for them.'

'But it is being greedy,' said Ruth; 'because if you did not think so much about sweet things, you would not ask so often. You know, Alice, how you used to tease Benson to buy you lemon drops whenever she went out.'

'Well!' exclaimed Alice; 'I remember who used to eat them when they were bought.'

'I did,' replied Ruth; 'but I would not have done it if mamma had wished me not; and you don't think anything about Lady Catharine.'

Alice felt from experience that there was nothing to be gained by arguing with Ruth, who generally contrived to see the right and the wrong of every case clearly, and when she did see it, never gave up. Madeline was a more persuadable person; and Alice did not in the least lose the hope of obtaining her wishes, though she continued silent after Ruth's last speech; and gathering up the bonbons from the table, put them into a drawer of the cabinet, and went on displaying her sashes. 'You never saw all these before,' she said: 'Benson used to keep them. I never did till the other day; but are they not beautiful?' They certainly were very handsome: bright green, and purple, and pink, and figured satin, and white with coloured roses—such an assemblage as had never been seen by the two children except in a draper's shop at Cottington. 'They belonged to an aunt of mine;—all but this one,' said Alice; and she held up a very pretty green ribbon with white spots; 'that was given me yesterday.'

'Yesterday!' exclaimed both the children, in surprise: 'how very kind of Lady Catharine!'

'It was not Lady Catharine,' said Alice, with a peculiar smile; and then she added, gravely, 'you know it is no exact good to me now.'

'Then it must have been Marsham,' observed Madeline; 'but she does not look good-natured.'

'No, nor Marsham; but never mind; somebody gave me this ribbon, and I think it is beautiful.'

'Oh! but Alice, do tell us; we won't say anything about it,' said Madeline, with her usual thoughtlessness.

Digitized by Google

'No, no!' exclaimed Alice, shaking her head, and delighted at a little mystery; 'I shan't tell you anything; so there will be no use in your guessing.'

'Besides,' observed Ruth, 'I don't like to promise that I won't say anything; and I don't think you ought to do it, Madeline.'

'Well,' said Madeline, recollecting herself, 'I suppose I must not promise not to tell; but I should like to know for all that.'

Alice held the ribbon up to show it off to the best advantage, and Madeline again began guessing, when Marsham came in hastily to say that Lady Catharine desired to speak with Miss Lennox. The ribbon was thrown down, and Alice was gone in an instant. Ruth took up a book, but Madeline could not withdraw her eyes from the beautiful ribbon. The taste for finery was a folly which her mamma had early discovered in her, and often desired to correct; but she was always dressed plainly, and she had, therefore, no great opportunity of displaying it. Now that there was no one to caution her, she gave way to it; and passing the ribbon round her waist, and holding it together that it might not be crumpled, she called to Ruth to admire it, and observe how well it suited with her white frock.

'You will spoil it,' said Ruth, scarcely raising her eyes.

'Oh no, I shall not, it would be impossible; I am not tying it. Just see, Ruth, only once.'

'Yes, well, very pretty,' replied Ruth, looking up again. Madeline went to the glass, and stood before it at a little distance that she might see herself plainly. 'If Alice is greedy, I know some one else who likes fine clothes,' said Ruth.

'Not clothes,' answered Madeline; 'it is only a ribbon.'

'That is just the same, papa said so; and he told you that mamma often talked to him about it, and that it was as bad in us to love to dress ourselves out, as it was in the girls at the school.'

Madeline felt a little ashamed, but still persisted that as the ribbon was not her own, there could be no harm in liking to see herself in it; and Ruth, having given her opinion, again returned to her book. Madeline continued to amuse herself with the sashes, putting them round her, one after the other, but finding none which she thought at all equal to her first favourite. 'How I should like to have just such a one!' she exclaimed at length, her admiration having increased to a long-

Digitized by Google

ing desire to possess the prize, especially as it suited so well with her white frock. 'I wonder whether Alice would give'—— The sentence was interrupted, for Madeline caught the sound of footsteps; and feeling that she was indulging a foolish wish, she threw the ribbon aside. Lady Catharine entered directly afterwards, and Alice with her. She kissed the two children almost affectionately, and said she hoped they had managed to entertain themselves pretty well; but on glancing round the room, and observing the display of Alice's finery, she grew stern again, and desiring that all that nonsense might be put away, she told Madeline and Ruth to fetch their bonnets and capes, for they were to go into the garden, and drink tea in the summer-house. Madeline cast a wistful look at the green sash as Alice began folding it up, and offered to remain behind and help her; but Lady Catharine waved her hand, and pointed to the door, and Ruth whispered to her to be quick; Alice, too, gave a sign not to speak, and Madeline felt she must be careful not even to appear to disobey.

What had passed was but a trifle, and in itself seemed of very little consequence. Madeline knew that the mere admiring a pretty ribbon could be no harm, and she did not think that any one could find fault with her for merely putting it on, and wishing she had one like it; but she did not remember that a love of finery was one of her great faults, and that her mamma had often told her to try and not think about her dress at all, lest she should grow up to be silly and conceited, and should forget the promise of her baptism to renounce the pomps and vanities of the world. Madeline was thoughtless about everything—especially her faults; she never saw what she was doing till she had committed some serious offence, and the consequence was that she made but little improvement; for to be watchful over trifles is the only sure way of advancing in goodness. Alice, being very quick in all her movements, joined Ruth and Madeline before they had reached the bottom of the stairs. Lady Catharine's presence made them all feel shy, but Ruth remarked that Alice did not walk away from her, but kept close to her side; and when some question was asked as to what lessons had been done, and Alice gave a good account of her day's work, Lady Catharine's face looked quite gentle, and her smile was so sweet, that Ruth for the first time thought it might be possible to love her.

The table in the summer-house was spread for tea, with

Digitized by Google

bread and butter, and cakes and fruit; and to the children's great pleasure, there were the small brown cups and saucers, and plates with gilt edges, which they had been in the habit of playing with at the white house. None of them had believed it possible that Lady Catharine should think of such trifles; and when, after seeing them comfortably seated, she left them to themselves, they were loud in their exclamations of surprise and delight. Madeline declared that it was not at all like Lady Catharine, and she was sure some one else must have begged for them; but Alice said that Lady Catharine often remembered kind things, and Marsham had said one day that she never forgot a poor person in her life. Ruth, as being the steadiest, was fixed upon to pour out the tea, and the little party went on very comfortably; the principal amusement being Alice's description of what had happened since she came to the Manor. Sometimes, indeed, Alice's manner altered, and tears were in her eyes, if anything which was said brought back a particular remembrance of her dear mamma; but she was much more reconciled to her new life than she had been at Mrs Clifford's first visit, and did not protest, as she had done before, that she never should like living at the Manor.

The heat of the afternoon had by this time gone off, and when the tea was over, Alice proposed that they should play hide and seek. There were capital places in the garden, she said, and they might go into one or two of the back courts if they liked it; 'not into the farthest one though,' she added, pointing to a wall adjoining the outhouses: 'there is a way up there into the strange rooms, and so it 's forbidden.'

'Oh! how I wish it was not!' exclaimed Madeline; 'it would be such fun to go; there must be something wonderful there.'

'No, there is not,' replied Alice. 'I asked Marsham about them once; and she said they were the rooms which Lady Catharine had a great many years ago, when Mr Hyde, her husband, you know, was alive; and that his bedroom and study were there, and that makes her so particular, because she wants to keep everything just as it used to be, and she thinks that if every one was allowed to go there, they would be put out of order; so Marsham goes in and dusts it all herself. I would ask her to take me with her, if Lady Catharine had not made such a fuss, and declared she would send me to school if I ever did.' Ruth looked at the windows, notwithstanding this

Digitized by Google

account, with a great deal of interest; and felt that she would rather have seen those few shut up rooms than any others in the house; but there was no good to be gained by wishing, and the game began. It was a long and a merry one. Behind old yew hedges, and large trees, and projecting walls, and half-open doors, the children hid, in the certainty that no one would dream of finding them there; and, unmindful of Lady Catharine, or Marsham, or the dull garden, they made the air ring with their shouts of joyous laughter as loudly as if they had been playing in the shrubbery at the Parsonage.

Alice was naturally the most successful in concealing herself; she knew every turn and corner, for when left alone her chief amusement was to spy out all the odd places belonging to the house; and, at length, after the game had continued for about twenty minutes, she was declared by her little companions to be quite lost. They had looked everywhere, and called, and even entreated that she would show herself, but no answer had been returned.

'She is gone into the house,' said Ruth; 'and that is so foolish when it was against our rule.'

'Yes,' said Madeline, 'and if we had done it she would have been very angry.'

'I don't think she can be, either,' continued Ruth, after a little thought: 'she said to me again that we were not to do it just before she ran away.'

'That might have been for fun, to deceive us,' replied Madeline; 'you know Alice will do such things sometimes.'

As she said this Madeline turned down a long walk leading to the door of the forbidden court, and when she reached the bottom, she leaned against the wall to rest herself, feeling tired with play, and vexed with Alice; whilst Ruth, determining to make another search, walked away in a different direction. Madeline began calling again for Alice, and when she stopped, the sound of voices in the court was plainly heard. Some persons were talking together, and Madeline fancied that one of them was Alice. The tone seemed the same, though she did not hear what passed. Once more she repeated her name, and a moment afterwards a door was shut hastily, and Alice, stealing round the corner of the wall, stood by her side, laughing heartily. Madeline was eager in her questions as to what she had been doing, and where she had been hiding; but Alice would give no account of herself, and only insisted on their

Digitized by Google

joining Ruth. Madeline agreed; but as she turned round to pick up her handkerchief, which had fallen down, she was surprised to see the door of the servants' court open, and a woman dressed in mourning, and looking extremely like Benson, appear, who, after spying about, walked quickly towards a door in the garden wall which adjoined the park.

'It is Benson, I am sure,' exclaimed Madeline, and she was going to run after her, when Alice pulled her back.

'No, no, nonsense, never mind,' she exclaimed, colouring deeply; 'let us find Ruth.'

'But it looked just like her; I am sure it must be her; do let me go and speak.'

'How foolish!' exclaimed Alice; 'she is gone now—see.' The garden door was closed, and the woman, whoever she might be, was gone. Madeline persisted that it was Benson, and Alice laughed, and again called it nonsense; and Madeline, whose attention was soon drawn away from any subject, returned once more, though, without success, to the question of Alice's hiding-place. They found Ruth in the summer-house; she had given Alice up, and began to complain that she had broken the rules of the game. Alice, however, persisted that she had not, for she had not been in the house.

'Then you were talking to Benson in the servants' court,' said Madeline, 'and that was against the rules, for you told us we must not go there.'

Alice blushed again, but before she could answer, Ruth exclaimed, 'Benson! is she come back? and may you see her, Alice?'

Alice looked still more uncomfortable, and in an awkward manner said, 'Benson was to have stayed in London a month.'

'But she did not,' observed Madeline; 'I am sure it was Benson who went through the garden, and I know I heard your voice, Alice, in the court.'

'Listening! listening! for shame!' exclaimed Alice, the crimson in her cheeks spreading itself over her forehead and neck.

'It was not listening,' replied Madeline, angrily; 'I could not help myself.'

'Well, it is of no consequence,' said Alice; 'it is no one's business but my own, and we won't talk any more about it. I want you to tell me, Madeline, where you got your bonbons.'

'Why, what good can it do you?' asked Ruth, who was struck by the awkwardness of Alice's manner.

Digitized by Google

'You can't have any like them, because they came from France,' said Madeline.

Alice looked disappointed. 'Are you sure?' she said.

'Yes, quite; and I know there are none to be had here, nor at Cottington; for mamma tried the last time we were there.'

This seemed to settle the question, for the shops at Cottington contained, in the children's belief, all that was most wonderful and beautiful in the world. Alice showed her vexation in her countenance, and instead of proposing another game, sat down, and began pulling off the leaves of the evergreen-honeysuckles which twined round the summer-house. 'There is no use in staying here, if you are so stupid,' said Ruth, after proposing several plays, all of which were disliked; 'I shall go and feed Marsham's rabbits;' and she walked away.

Madeline was going to follow, but Alice pulled her back. 'Stop, Madeline,' she said; 'why won't you give me the bonbons?' Poor Madeline felt a little surprise, for she had forgotten that any claim had been made upon her. 'It is very ill-natured of you,' continued Alice; 'you can't eat them yourself, and you won't let any one else have them; and I would give you anything you like in exchange.'

'Anything!' exclaimed Madeline, who had a notion that since Alice had been adopted by Lady Catharine Hyde, she must of course possess many more beautiful things than she had done before.

'Yes, anything,' repeated Alice; 'I will tell you what I would give you, if you liked; one of the sashes—one of those beautiful sashes you saw in my dressing-room.'

'Would you, indeed?' and the remembrance of the green ribbon with the white spots came clearly before Madeline's mind; 'but you would not be allowed.'

'Oh, yes! trust me; I may do just as I like in those things; let me have the bonbons, and you shall have the sash.'

The temptation was great, for Madeline had never during her whole life possessed anything so handsome. 'I should like it very much,' she said, 'but then'——

'Well, what? make haste—why don't you say yes?'

'It would be no good,' said Madeline, sorrowfully; 'mamma would not let me wear it; she likes Ruth and me always to be dressed alike.' This was rather a difficulty; but Alice, having once made the proposal to exchange something for the bonbons,

Digitized by Google

was not daunted, and began to recount her list of valuables, in hopes that Madeline would find something else which would do as well. But it was in vain. Madeline cared neither for wafer-boxes, nor coloured sealing-wax, nor mother-of-pearl winders, nor transparent slates; she wished only for the ribbon, and if she did not have that, she did not want anything. 'It is the green sash I should like,' she said; 'that is the prettiest of them all.'

Alice's face brightened, as if a happy thought had struck her. 'Well,' she said, 'I don't know, perhaps it might be managed; would you really give me the bonbons, if I were to give you and Ruth a sash alike?'

Madeline, surprised at the offer, considered for a few moments, and then said, 'Yes,' though not without a little feeling of reluctance; adding, 'you may let me take them home, and then I will ask mamma to send Smith, the gardener, with the bonbons to-morrow.'

'No, no, indeed!' exclaimed Alice, 'that will never do; Lady Catharine might know about it then.'

To Madeline this sounded as a reason for not having them at all; but Alice was not thoroughly sincere, and when self-indulgence came in her way, she was unable to overcome the temptation of gratifying it, even at the risk of doing wrong. Madeline's scruples were therefore laughed at, and she was told that it would be necessary to keep the bonbons till they met again, for that it would not be safe to send them; that, in fact, it would be as well not to say anything about them.'

'But I must to mamma,' replied Madeline; 'I shall show her the sashes to-night, and she will ask directly how I came by them.'

At this difficulty Alice began to laugh, and exclaimed, 'But you don't expect to carry back the sashes with you to-night, do you? why, I have not got them yet.'

'Not got them?' repeated Madeline, with a blank face of disappointment, 'I thought you said you would gave us each one alike.'

'So. I did; but the other must be bought first.'

Madeline was puzzled. She knew that Alice was scarcely ever allowed to go beyond the park—never, indeed, unless Lady Catharine was with her; and how it would be possible to procure another ribbon, equally beautiful with the one she has just seen, in any place but Cottington, was a mystery which she was

Digitized by Google

unable to comprehend. Madeline did not know that the green ribbon had been a present from Benson, who had brought it from London only the day before; and, without Lady Catharine's knowledge, had managed to see Alice and give it into her own hands. Benson had been careful to keep this fact secret, for she knew that Lady Catharine was aware of her great fault—her love of gossiping and repeating strange stories, and was determined not to allow Alice to see anything more of her. She had, moreover, offended Lady Catharine very much, by being impertinent to her when she was first informed that Alice was to be taken from her care; and, in consequence, she had been forbidden ever to come near the house.

Benson was a foolish woman, and did many wrong things; but she was really fond of Alice, and it cut her to the heart to be told she was to leave her. Having a sister living in Laneton, a dressmaker, she resolved to settle with her, and take part of her business; and accordingly, after a journey to London to see some relations, she had returned only two days before the visit of Ruth and Madeline to the Manor, bringing with her the gay ribbon which they had so much admired. Alice was proud of finery, and pleased with the sash, but she knew she should not be able to wear it for some time; and even if she could do so, she liked something to eat much better than something to wear. The love of eating was as strong in her as the love of dress was in Madeline; and she had that afternoon been trying to persuade Benson, whom she met whilst she was seeking for a good hiding-place, to bring some bonbons with her the next time she came. Benson knew nothing about bonbons, or how dear they were; and fancying it would be only the expense of a few halfpence, agreed to buy some in the village; but she told Alice that she could not undertake to bring them up to the house to her, because it was only for those two days, whilst the upper housemaid was away, and the under housemaid, who was her cousin, was able to keep watch for her, that she had been able to come, contrary to Lady Catharine's order. If Alice wanted to see her again, they must meet at the garden gate, which opened into the park. Alice had agreed to this, without once considering what a very wrong thing she was doing; she remembered neither Lady Catharine's commands, nor the great sinfulness of deceit, nor anything but her own wishes. For the sake of the bonbons, for the pleasure of indulging her taste for eating, she was willing to displease not only a human being,

Digitized by Google

who had adopted her when she was a friendless orphan, but One infinitely greater and kinder, the all-seeing God, who hates deceit, and from whom no thought or action can be concealed. Madeline saw that something was wrong, and she knew that Alice was going to disobey Lady Catharine; but though her conscience whispered that it would be better to give up all thought of the sashes, and that even if she had them her mamma might not like them to be worn; and that, at any rate, she was indulging the love of finery, which she had been warned against, still she allowed herself to hesitate, and think, and wish; and the consequence was what might easily be imagined—she agreed to give Alice the bonbons when next they met, and to receive the two sashes in return. She half repented, indeed, when Alice told her that she must not say anything to Ruth; for she had never kept anything secret from her before; but the idea of surprising her in some degree made up for the restraint she was obliged to put upon herself; and though unable to find out from Alice how the ribbon was to be procured, she persisted in her resolution; and when the three children were summoned into the house by Marsham, no one would have supposed, from their merry voices and light steps, that two of them had determined upon doing what they knew to be wrong. Whilst we think only upon indulging our own wishes, our consciences are often silent; it is only when we have gained our point that we begin to see how sinfully we have acted. If Alice and Madeline had been reminded of their baptismal vow, and asked whether they had broken it by gratifying their desires for the pomps and vanities of the world, and the sinful lusts of the flesh, they would most probably have answered 'No.' They might even have supposed that it was only grown-up people who could ever be tempted to be guilty of such sins; but this is not the way in which God judges. He sees the working of our evil hearts in our slightest actions, and the faults of children are in His eyes very grievous, because He knows that they proceed from the deep corruption of their nature; and that if they are not checked, they will assuredly end in great offences. Alice and Madeline knew all this—that is, they had been taught it, but they did not think about it. They played, laughed, looked at pictures, and told stories, and enjoyed the dish of raspberries and milk which Lady Catharine provided for them in the study, without any misgiving; and it was only when, an hour afterwards, they knelt down, each in

Digitized by Google

her separate chamber, to offer their evening prayers, that anything like a doubt crossed their minds as to whether God was indeed well pleased with them. Alice thought of it, but the thought was disagreeable, and she turned away from it; and, as soon as the words were repeated, hurried into bed, that she might forget it. But Madeline's conscience was more tender; her mamma had taught her to try and recollect the principal naughty things which she had done during the day, and to mention them in her prayers at night, and the agreement with Alice immediately struck her as one; but then if it was wrong it ought to be given up—she ought to refuse to take the sashes, or to give Alice the bonbons; but she had promised, and Alice would think it unkind; it seemed to her difficult to know how to decide, and in the middle of her prayers she stopped to consider. The servant looked into the room at the time to see if she was in bed, and Madeline thought it would not do to determine then; so she finished her prayers with an unhappy mind, and instead of lying down in peace, and falling asleep immediately, she tossed about restless and uncomfortable for more than a quarter of an hour, with all sorts of confused thoughts in her head, and with a consciousness that the right way of acting was clear, but that she had not strength to follow it. Why did not Madeline pray that God would help her?

CHAPTER VI.

THERE are few children who have not at some time or other experienced the same feelings as Madeline when she awoke the next morning, with the dim consciousness that something disagreeable had happened, or was going to happen—that there was some cause why she should be less light-hearted than usual. The truth was easily recollected, but, unhappily, Madeline was less inclined to do her duty, and give up her wishes in the morning, when the sun was shining, and the birds were singing, and everything looked cheerful around her, than she had been in the dark night, when she lay in her bed, with nothing to distract her thoughts from the remembrance that she was in the presence of the great God, who knew all that was passing in her heart. Ruth saw that something was making

Digitized by Google

her sister uncomfortable ; and fancying that it was because she was not ready with her lessons, she helped her to finish dressing, and promised to hear her repeat them when she went down-stairs ; and Madeline did not say that this was not the reason, though the day before she would have shrunk from the idea of hiding anything from Ruth. She only hurried over all she had to do, that she might not be asked any questions, and then knelt down to say her prayers, as usual ; but as it had been the night previous, so it was now. Madeline was afraid to use holy words, and ask God to keep her from sin, when she was resolving to commit it ; she knew well that this would only be a mockery. There was a great difficulty in her mind, and a long struggle between her conscience, which told her what she ought to do, and her inclination, which told her what she ought not. Still she did not pray to be enabled to act rightly ; she tried to decide by herself ; and the consequence was, as it always must be, that she went wrong. She put off determining the question till another occasion, because she said to herself that it was not necessary to settle then ; there would be no chance of her meeting Alice that day, so she would not be obliged to give her the bonbons, and she would think about it again, when she had more time ; perhaps it would be as well to have nothing to do with the matter, but she would see ; and having thus quieted her conscience, Madeline said her prayers in haste, making, at the same time, the excuse for herself that she was late. This was but a bad beginning of the day, for when we are careless and inattentive to God we may be quite sure that we shall not be able to do well in other respects ; and before breakfast was ready, Madeline had spoken several hasty words to Ruth, besides wasting her time, and failing to have one lesson as perfect as it ought to be.

Mrs Clifford, who soon found out if anything was amiss, would probably have made some remark upon her little girl's manner, which was far from being as cheerful as usual, if her attention had not been occupied by a letter which had arrived by the post, and the interest of which prevented her from paying her usual attention to what was going on. She read it twice through, though it was rather a long one, and then gave it to her husband ; and, when he had ended it, they began talking of the contents. The two children, however, could not at all understand what was meant. They heard something about their aunt Mary and their grandmamma, and a marriage which

Digitized by Google

was to take place soon; but who was to be married, or what their aunt Mary and their grandmamma had to do with the matter, they could not make out. It was clear, however, that the business of the letter was important; for, directly after breakfast, Mrs Clifford called the children to her, and, after setting them some writing copies, told them they were to go on by themselves, for that she should not be able to attend to them for the next hour; and soon afterwards they saw her walking in the garden with their papa, and talking to him earnestly. Madeline felt glad in the hope that she should not be called so soon as usual to repeat her imperfect lesson; and, as it happened, Mrs Clifford was detained until she had had time to look over her French and geography, and to find out some places in the map which she had read of the day before; no fault, therefore, was found, and her mamma even praised her. But Madeline was not happy at being praised; she knew that she did not deserve it. The dinner hour arrived, and still there had been no opportunity for thinking; and in the afternoon Mr Clifford took both the children for a walk with him; and they came in only in time for tea, and afterwards went out again upon the shore, where they stayed so long that it was very nearly their bed-time before they returned. Madeline's mind had been quite occupied, and she had almost forgotten her engagement with Alice; and the pain she had felt the night before was nearly gone. Yet Madeline was not better because she was happier; her happiness was caused by forgetfulness; but God never forgets. To Ruth the day had been an unpleasant one, though she had not the same causes for self-reproach as Madeline. She was uncomfortable; not about herself, but about her papa and mamma, who, she could plainly see, had something in their thoughts which distressed them. Mrs Clifford stayed at home all the afternoon, writing a long letter; and once, on going into the room, Ruth remarked that tears were in her eyes, though she tried to hide them; and directly afterwards Mrs Clifford called her little girl to her, and kissed her so often, and gazed upon her so sadly, that Ruth longed to ask what was the matter. Her papa, too, was not at all like himself when he took them for their walk. He was silent, and looked very grave; and sighed when an old man, at whose cottage they stopped, observed what a pleasure it must be to him to have his little girls with him. Mr Clifford scarcely ever sighed; and Ruth was sure it must be something serious which could

Digitized by Google

make him do so. What it was, however, she could not in the least find out, though she thought it must have something to do with the letter; but when she began talking to Madeline her fears rather passed away, for Madeline laughed at her for worrying herself about it. Ruth went to bed that night with much more serious thoughts than Madeline; and when she prayed, as she had been taught, that God would bless her papa and mamma, she really thought about the words, and used them from her heart, and then she felt relieved, for she knew that if anything disagreeable was going to happen, God would be not only able but willing to help them to bear it.

The two next days Ruth watched anxiously when the post came, but it did not bring any letters of consequence, and the cheerfulness of her papa and mamma began to make her think she must have been fanciful. On the third day they were rather earlier at breakfast than usual, and the children were sent into the school-room before the post came in; and as they were leaving the breakfast parlour, Mrs Clifford said, she hoped they would be careful at their lessons, for she had some intention of taking them out with her in the afternoon; perhaps they might go to the Manor. Madeline's countenance changed, and she ran quickly out of the room. It seemed certain at first that she must decide at once; for Alice would expect the bonbons, and had no doubt procured the sashes. It did not seem possible to draw back; but Madeline could not make up her mind to fulfil her agreement, and again she put off the evil hour. It was the time for their writing, and she knew her mamma would be displeased if she was not ready; so she resolved not to settle positively to do wrong, but to take the bonbons in her bag, and then talk to Alice a little more upon the subject. If she did not determine to give them, she persuaded herself there could be no harm in carrying them with her. So Madeline reasoned; and so a great many other persons reason. They cannot resolve to forsake what is wrong at once; and they put themselves in the way of temptation, and then say they cannot help yielding to it. Madeline went to her writing, and took more pains than usual with it, and really fancied that she was trying to do right; and when Ruth began looking at the door, and wondering why their mamma did not come, she reproved her, and said that she ought not to talk and look about her. Ruth, however, could not help feeling wonder, though after Madeline had spoken she

Digitized by Google

did not express it; and when, at last, Mrs Clifford came into the room, all her past fears about the letters and bad news returned. Mrs Clifford looked uncomfortable; she sat quiet for some time without speaking; and when she began to hear them repeat their lessons, it seemed to be a trouble to her, and not a pleasure as it usually was. She smiled, however, at the end, and told them they were good children, and that she hoped, as she had promised, to take them with her to the Manor in the afternoon.

'I should like to know what is the matter,' said Ruth, as they went to their rooms to prepare for dinner: 'didn't you see to-day, Madeline, how very strange mamma looked?'

'Once I did,' replied Madeline, 'when I said something about having a new geography book next month. I almost thought she was going to cry; but you know mamma never cries, and I am sure that could not have made her.'

'No,' said Ruth, laughing; 'but it was not only then; it was all the time she was hearing us.'

Madeline merely said 'Was it?' Had it been any other time she would have asked a great many questions, and guessed all sorts of reasons; but just then she was turning over her beautiful bonbons, and putting them into a bag that she might not be hurried after dinner.

Mr Clifford did not come to luncheon, which was still another reason for Ruth's thinking that something must be going wrong, or at any rate that something important was about to happen. She was sure he was not gone out, for she had caught a glimpse of him at his writing-table as she passed the study door. When they were dressed for their walk, Ruth observed the bag hanging on Madeline's arm, and asked her why she was going to carry it, as they had nothing to take with them. Madeline did not know what to reply, but muttered something indistinctly. She did not wish to tell a story; but having begun to do what she did not like to own, she was induced to say anything for an excuse; and besides this she was obliged to crumple the bag up, though it was very pretty and easily spoiled, and put it in the pocket of her frock, in order that nothing more might be said about it. But the visit to the Manor was not to be paid that afternoon; for at the park gate they met Lady Catharine driving in a little pony-carriage, and Alice with her. Lady Catharine was pleased to see Mrs Clifford, and telling the page to hold the ponies, she got out and walked with her up and

Digitized by Google

down the straight piece of road in front of the park paling; whilst the children, delighted at being left together, talked fast and merrily. Madeline hoped that Alice had forgotten the bonbons; for, notwithstanding her wish to possess the ribbon in exchange, she had been too uncomfortable during the last few days not to feel glad to be out of the way of temptation. She did not, however, escape so easily. Ruth went to gather some wild flowers in the hedge; and then Alice, catching hold of Madeline's hand, exclaimed: 'Well, where are the bonbons?'

'I—I—do you really want them?' replied Madeline.

'Yes, of course; you don't mean to draw back? oh, how mean!' Madeline blushed, half with anger, half with shame. 'After all my trouble,' continued Alice, 'seeing Benson and all —for I was obliged to beg for another from her.'

'Then you have the sashes,' said Madeline, whilst, notwithstanding her confusion, her eyes sparkled with delight and expectation.

'Not yet, but I shall have the other; Benson says so.'

'Have you seen her again, then?' inquired Madeline.

'Yes, once at that gate—the garden gate into the park. Do you know, Madeline, I did not half like it, because of Lady Catharine; but I had promised you, and so I was forced to do it.' Poor Madeline felt vexed when she recollected how foolish she had been in receiving such a promise; and keeping to her resolution of reminding Alice that they were doing wrong in deceiving Lady Catharine, she now proposed that they should give up the notion altogether. To her surprise, Alice seemed at first a little inclined to listen; for although she did not feel what Madeline did, when she knew that she was grieving her papa and mamma; still she had lately become more desirous of pleasing Lady Catharine, whose few words of praise were particularly valued, from the fact of their being but seldom given.

'Then I may take them back,' said Madeline, as soon as she found that Alice agreed with her scruples; and, as she spoke, she opened her bag, and displayed the gay paper and gilding, in which the bonbons were wrapped. Alice's eyes brightened.

'O Madeline! I don't know; how beautiful they are! and so many! Are you sure they are chocolate?'

'Not sure, because I have not opened them all; but several are, I know'

Digitized by Google

'And you don't like them, and I do, it seems such a pity—and I know they won't hurt me, I ate all those you gave me the other day, and I was not at all the worse for it. Just let me look at them one minute.' Madeline gave up the bag, and Alice put a few in her lap, looking round cautiously at the same time, to see that Lady Catharine was not near. 'I don't believe it would be so very wrong,' she continued; 'it is all nonsense thinking they would do me harm; and, besides, Benson is to bring me the other sash to-morrow, and I shan't know what to do with two.'

'To-morrow?' repeated Madeline, 'then you are quite sure of having it?'

'Yes, quite; Benson's sister, the dressmaker, has it, and she is to get it from her. Your white frock would look so nice with it, Madeline.'

'Better than it does with this old pink one,' said Madeline, looking down at her dress. At that minute Mrs Clifford was heard calling to Ruth, who had wandered away to some little distance. Alice caught up some of the bonbons to put them again into the bag, but, in moving, several fell down.

'What shall we do?' she exclaimed, as she stooped to look for them; 'Lady Catharine will be sure to see them.' Madeline drew nearer to the pony-carriage to help in the search, but she was not able to be of much use, for Ruth came running towards her, telling her that her mamma was gone into a cottage with Lady Catharine, and that they were to follow directly.

'Coming, coming,' exclaimed Madeline, hastily; going closer to Alice, she then whispered, 'Shall I take the bag?'

'No, no,' replied Alice, 'I may as well have all now;' and hiding the bag in the corner for Ruth not to see, she wished both the children 'good-bye,' and began looking again for the stray bonbons. Madeline walked slowly away, with a feeling of greater pleasure than pain. She had gained her wishes, and not entirely by her own doing, and so she fancied herself free from blame, and yet her conscience still told her that all was not right. If she had not brought the bonbons with her, Alice would not have kept them; but Madeline was glad instead of sorry at being forced to give them up, and when the idea crossed her mind that she might even now refuse to receive the sashes, it gave her a pang, and she said to herself that it would only be foolish, since all the harm was done. Alice had seen Benson, and taken the bonbons, and it could neither make things better

Digitized by Google

nor worse for her to give up her part of the business, and part with what she liked, without having anything in exchange—and after all it was Alice who had disobeyed. This seemed very true, and it passed quickly in Madeline's thoughts, as she followed Ruth in silence to the cottage. But the sound of Lady Catharine's voice brought the dread, that what had been done might be found out, and Madeline's heart sank within her. Yet why should it—if she had done no harm?

The next day was Sunday: there were no letters, but Ruth had not less cause for uneasiness than before, for there was no longer any doubt that something had happened to distress her papa and mamma—their manner showed it too plainly. Madeline likewise was altered: she was fretful and discontented; but Ruth did not think much about it, and was so occupied in watching her mamma, that she did not observe a little scene which passed between her sister and Alice Lennox, as they met at the church door, when the service was over. Alice managed to draw Madeline aside, and pulling a small brown paper parcel out of her pocket, she offered it to her. Madeline shook her head and seemed shocked, and Alice coloured, and laughed, and tore off a piece of the paper to show something green within. Madeline looked, and Alice whispered, 'Promise you won't show it to your mamm, till I say you may.' Madeline drew back, and pushed the parcel away, but as Alice was about to put it into her pocket, she caught hold of it to inspect the ribbon more closely. That second look completed the temptation.

'Why must not I tell mamma, now?' she said.

'I can't say; there is no time: will you or will you not?' Alice laid her hand upon the parcel. Madeline gazed with a longing desire to possess; then yielded, promised, and took possession.

CHAPTER VII.

PERHAPS it might be interesting if we were to go back with Alice Lennox to the Manor, and see what kind of afternoon she spent with Lady Catharine Hyde after they had returned from the second service, and had looked in at the school to inquire how many girls had been present at church, and which were to have prize-marks for good behaviour. Alice

Digitized by Google

was less talkative than usual (for, strange though it may seem, she was sometimes very talkative when alone with Lady Catharine); she did not make any remarks upon the singing, nor repeat anything which Mr Clifford had said in his sermon; neither did she once mention the names of Madeline and Ruth. She had a weight upon her mind which prevented her from turning her thoughts to other things. Lady Catharine, too, was silent;—indeed she seldom said much except when Alice began:—but she held her little companion's hand in hers, and once or twice patted it, and looked smilingly in her face; and these trifling marks of affection Alice had lately begun to understand meant as much, or more, than other person's words. She could not, indeed, tell how much—few children can fully comprehend the love which grown-up people feel for them—but if Alice had known how, when Lady Catharine rose in the early morning, one of the first prayers was offered for her; how, during the long day, she was forming schemes for her improvement and her happiness; how she watched the changes of her countenance, and joyed in every symptom of amendment in her disposition; and how, when night had closed in, and Alice was asleep, she would steal to her bedside, look at her, and try to discover a likeness to her mother, and then bend over, and kiss her, and silently ask God to bless and guard her from harm; if Alice had known all this, she would perhaps have been even graver than she was, for she would have felt sorrow and shame at the idea of having done anything that might vex the dearest and kindest friend whom she possessed on earth.

Lady Catharine went to her room for nearly half an hour when they reached home, and, during this time, Alice looked over her collect, and hymn, and a certain portion of the catechism which she did not remember correctly, in order to repeat them when she was called. She was obliged to be more particular than even in her common lessons in having them perfect; for Lady Catharine always declared that it pained her to hear sacred things said blunderingly, as if they were not thought about or cared for. In general, Alice dined when Lady Catharine had luncheon, and drank tea with Marsham; but on Sundays, in the summer time, she went into the garden, to walk up and down and learn all that she had to say, and then returned to drink tea with Lady Catharine in a little room called the study, which opened out of the drawing-room, and which, from its having a large bow window and pretty pink furniture, and containing a number of

Digitized by Google

books and pictures, was the most cheerful in the house. Alice, perhaps, would have liked better to have had tea in the summer-house, as Madeline and Ruth did, but Lady Catharine was afraid of her taking cold, and Alice did not venture to ask. This evening, however, it was so warm that Lady Catharine herself proposed that they should go out for a little while. Taking a book with her, she led the way to a bench at the lower end of the broad middle walk, and desiring Alice to seat herself on a stool at her feet, she began to read aloud. The book was one of which Alice had already heard a considerable portion. It was the story of a man who, having lived for many years in a large city with his wife and children, was told by a person, whose word he thoroughly believed, that, if he remained there, he must, without doubt, miserably perish; that the city was doomed to destruction; and that his only hope of escape was by immediately leaving all he loved—unless he could prevail on his family to join him—and setting out on a wearisome journey towards a bright and lovely home, prepared for him in a distant land by the Lord, whose servant he was. It described the sorrow of the poor man, and the obstinacy of his wife and children; the difficulties of his way, and the hope which cheered him in the midst of them; and, though it was written in old-fashioned language, and there were many parts hard to understand; and some which Lady Catharine explained in words different from those used in the book; yet, on the whole, Alice was interested. She knew well that the city was intended to represent the evil world; and the man the Christian, who resolves to give up all wicked practices, and live according to the law of God; and that by the lovely home in a distant land was to be understood that glorious heaven where all who have served their Saviour here shall be happy for ever and ever. At times, Lady Catharine stopped, and asked Alice questions, or answered any which were put to her. Her manner was not winning, like Mr Clifford's, and she did not always explain things clearly; yet Alice, who for many months had had no person to instruct her except Benson, was glad to meet with some one who was willing to attend to what she had to say, and to try, at least, to give her a reason for the things which puzzled her. Lady Catharine had read but a few pages, when, laying down the book, she said—

'Alice, was there anything in Mr Clifford's sermon at all like the history of Christian's journey?'

Alice looked a little confused, for during the last part of the

Digitized by Google

sermon she had not been attending, and she did not immediately recollect. At length, however, she said, 'I think Mr Clifford mentioned something about every one's having a journey to go.'

'Yes,' replied Lady Catharine; 'but can you tell me what he said was the first thing which made people set out on it in earnest?' Alice was silent. 'It was the same thing,' continued Lady Catharine, 'which made Christian leave the city of Destruction, it was a belief in what was told him; and Mr Clifford said also, that that was the reason why when children are baptized they are obliged to promise that they will "believe all the articles of the Christian faith," because if they do not believe rightly, they will be sure not to act rightly. I think, Alice, we read a little while ago in the Bible, something which will give an instance of this; of a man who believed, and his sons-in-law who did not believe, and what happened to them in consequence.'

'Was it about Lot?' inquired Alice.

'Yes,' replied Lady Catharine; 'if you remember, when Lot went to tell his sons-in-law that the city of Sodom would be destroyed, it is said that, "he seemed to them as one that mocked;" and so, when Lot escaped to the mountain, they persisted in staying behind, and were burned up with all the other miserable inhabitants of that wicked city. They did not believe, and it is just the same in these days.'

'But no one has come to tell us that we shall be destroyed,' said Alice.

Lady Catharine looked vexed, and taking up a Bible, which she had with her, she turned to the third chapter of the second epistle of St Peter, and pointing to the tenth verse, said, 'Read it.'

And Alice read, 'The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat; the earth also, and the works that are therein, shall be burned up.'

'You see,' observed Lady Catharine, almost sternly, 'that you spoke without thought.' Alice felt ashamed, and Lady Catharine continued: 'This is one of the great things we are bound to believe, but there are many others; where are they to be learned?'

'In the Creed?' asked Alice.

'Yes,' replied Lady Catharine, more kindly; 'they are to be

Digitized by Google

learned from the Creed; and the Creed teaches us shortly what the Bible tells us in full; and it was taught by the apostles to the early Christians, and by them to those who came after them; and so on down to these days. We are certain, therefore, that it is true.'

'But,' said Alice, who had a little recovered her courage, and was becoming more attentive, 'it can make no difference whether persons believe every single thing, if they do what they ought.'

'It does, though, make a great difference,' replied Lady Catharine; 'and no persons can do what they ought, in everything, if they do not believe what they ought. You, for instance, Alice, if you did not believe what I told you the other day about Benson, that she was an ignorant person without proper principles, who would lead you into mischief, would be unhappy without her, and would think me unkind, and perhaps might even be tempted to do something wrong in order to see her.' At the mention of Benson, Alice was thunderstruck. The colour forsook her cheek, and again rushed to it, till her forehead became crimson, and in an agony of confusion she turned her face away, at the risk of bringing upon herself a reproof for inattention. She thought instantly that Lady Catharine knew all she had been doing; but Lady Catharine did not know, nor suspect; she only mentioned Benson's name as an example, and Alice was much relieved when she went on: 'You will be able, I daresay, to remember many instances in which if you had not believed what was told you, you would have been led into mischief.'

Alice could not think of any at the moment, for she was still rather frightened, and could only answer, 'Yes.'

Lady Catharine again took up the book, and continued reading; and Alice, while she listened, forgot her fears, but after a time they returned again. Lady Catharine was tired, and said she thought tea must be ready in the study, and they walked towards the house; but as they passed the servants' court Lady Catharine recurred to the same subject—the duty of children to believe what their friends tell them, as it is the duty of all persons to believe what God tells them. Pointing to the shut-up rooms, she said, 'Alice, I think you have every reason to believe my word, for I have never deceived you.'

Alice murmured, 'Yes.'

'Then,' pursued Lady Catharine, 'you must think that what

Digitized by Google

I tell you I shall do, is my real, firm intention. I daresay you cannot understand why I should forbid you to enter those rooms, and I am not going to give you any reasons; I only want to remind you that as certainly as I find you have been there, so certainly I shall send you away from me; where, I cannot tell; but I will have no one in my house, whom I cannot trust.' Lady Catharine drew herself up and looked very tall, and Alice breathed quickly, and did not know what to say. Instead of going into the house, Lady Catharine turned in the walk again; and fearing that she had spoken harshly, she said in her kindest manner, 'It is my love for you, Alice, which makes me say this; I should be so sorry—so very sorry—to be obliged to part with you; and yet if I could not depend upon you, I must do it. But you would travel far over the wide world, and find no one who loves you as I do;' and Lady Catharine, stooping down, kissed Alice's forehead, and added, 'you are my own Alice, my child.' This was one of the few occasions on which Lady Catharine had shown something of her real affection; and Alice could have been happy and pleased, but for the remembrance of Benson, and the sash, and the bonbons. She was indeed glad when Lady Catharine went on talking to her in the same tone; and allowed her, when they went in, to pour out tea; and then began to tell her some stories about some of the old family pictures: all these things made her feel at home, and she was sorry when Marsham came to tell her it was bed-time; but when she was left alone she thought of Lady Catharine only as being severe, and when she laid down to sleep it seemed as if she could still hear her repeating—'I will have no one in my house whom I cannot trust.'

CHAPTER VIII.

MADELINE and Ruth passed the evening somewhat in the same way as Alice Lennox; but they were not able to see as much of their papa as usual, for besides the two services, the school, and a funeral, there was a sick person to be visited; and when all this was done, Mr Clifford was tired and obliged to rest in his own room. The tea, however, was prepared in the arbour, and the children looked forward to it with pleasure; but

Digitized by Google

when the time arrived, they found less enjoyment than they had anticipated. Both their papa and mamma were silent; and after the tray was removed, Mrs Clifford went away, and her husband appeared engaged in his own thoughts. Madeline and Ruth looked at each other, but did not move, and the idea came into Madeline's mind that her papa might be vexed about something connected with her. A few minutes afterwards, Mr Clifford called them to him, and made them sit down by him, and then he said, 'We have been very grave to-night, my darlings; don't you think so?'

'You have been grave several nights, papa,' replied Ruth.

'Yes,' and Mr Clifford tried to smile; 'I am afraid I have, though I don't know exactly why I should be; but people often are grave, without being unhappy, and your mamma and I have had a good deal to make us thoughtful lately. Do you know your aunt Mary is going to be married?'

'Married! papa,' exclaimed both the children at once; 'and will she go away and leave poor grandmamma? Oh! what will she do?'

'Your grandmamma will not be left, I hope,' replied Mr Clifford; 'at least, I am sure that your aunt would never consent to be married, if there were not some one to take her place. But your mamma is your grandmamma's child, as well as your aunt Mary.'

'Mamma does not live with grandmamma,' observed Madeline, 'so she can't read to her as aunt Mary does.'

'Suppose your grandmamma were to come and live with us,' said Mr Clifford; 'would not that do away with the difficulty?'

Ruth considered a little—she did not express much pleasure at the prospect, for her grandmamma, Mrs Beresford, was very old, and a great invalid; and whenever the children were with her, they were obliged to be extremely quiet, and scarcely ran about or talked at all. 'If grandmamma lives here,' she said, at length, 'and mamma reads to her all day, there will be no one to hear us our lessons.'

'That difficulty may be done away with, too,' replied Mr Clifford, with a little hesitation. 'You and Madeline may go to school.'

Ruth raised her eyes to her father's face with an expression of complete bewilderment; whilst Madeline exclaimed, 'To school, papa, away from you! when should we come back again?'

Digitized by Google

'We should not like it,' said Ruth, sorrowfully.

'I do not think we should any of us like to be separated, my dear child,' said Mr Clifford; 'and yet it may be necessary.'

'But will it be, papa?' inquired Madeline; 'and when shall we go? will it be to Miss Freeman's?'

'No, not to Miss Freeman's,' replied Mr Clifford, with a smile; 'Miss Freeman has too many little girls already to take care of; but I think very likely it will be to a lady near London, a Mrs Carter, who is a great friend of your mamma's.'

'But papa,' began Ruth, 'I don't think—it seems'—— here she stopped, not knowing how to proceed.

'You don't think, perhaps, that I am in earnest, Ruth, because the thought seems sudden; but your mamma and I have been talking about it for several days.'

Poor Ruth looked miserable, and when she tried to speak, the words failed, and she burst into tears. Mr Clifford kissed her, and soothed her, but he did not try to comfort her by giving her any hope of remaining at home; for, in fact, from the first moment that he had known that Miss Beresford would be married and go to India, if it were not for her dislike to leaving her mother when she was old and ill, he had determined to propose that Mrs Beresford should come to Laneton to live. Mrs Clifford's time would then be constantly occupied, and there was no room for a governess in the house; it would be right, therefore, to send Ruth and Madeline to school, in order that their education might be properly taken care of. Mrs Clifford, who loved her mother very much, was pleased at the notion of having her with her, and trying to make her happy; but the prospect of parting with her children was a great trial; and nothing but her firm trust that so long as she acted rightly, God would order all things for good, had enabled her to consent with readiness. There were many questions asked as soon as the two little girls understood that their papa really meant what he had said, but they were principally put by Madeline; Ruth, although she dried her tears, and even tried to smile, still looked distressed, and scarcely liked to listen to anything that was said upon so disagreeable a subject. To Madeline, the idea, after the first moment, was rather agreeable than not. Of all things she liked seeing new places and new people; it would be delightful to go to London, and they should have a great deal to talk about when they came back; and, besides, it would be so strange to go to school, and to have new playfellows; and

Digitized by Google

very likely they should have prizes. Altogether, she thought there would be a good deal of fun in it; but she hoped Ruth would not cry, for all the girls would laugh at her.

'I shall not cry, you may be quite sure of that,' said Ruth, in an offended tone; 'I don't do it half as much as you do, Madeline; only you like going about, and I don't, and that is the reason you don't care as I do about school.'

'There is no cause to be ashamed of crying, my dear Ruth,' said Mr Clifford; 'I am not sure that I could not cry myself, if I were to try, about it.'

Ruth laughed. 'Oh no, papa; men never cry.'

'Not often when little girls see them, certainly; but I have more cause for it now, perhaps, than you have, because I see more things to make me uneasy and afraid.'

'Afraid of what, papa?' inquired Madeline.

'Afraid lest my two children should not behave well at school, and should forget what they have been taught, and return home spoiled in any way.'

'But our governess will teach us properly, as mamma does,' said Madeline.

'Yes, I fully believe she will, or I should not trust you to her; but school is a very different place from home. There are many more temptations and trials, and you will have more companions to lead you into mischief.'

'But we shall not attend to them, papa,' said Ruth, whose spirit was now roused by the idea of seeing more of the world, and being placed in difficulties.

'Ah, Ruth! that is the danger; we think we shall not do wrong, and so we do not keep ourselves humble, and do not pray to God to guard us. It is very much safer to feel that most likely we shall wish to do as others do, because our hearts are as sinful; and then we shall learn not to trust to ourselves, and through the mercy of God we may escape.'

'But Ruth is always good at home,' said Madeline. Ruth blushed, and felt pleased; though her conscience reminded her of several faults which none of her friends knew.

'God only can judge whether Ruth is always good,' said Mr Clifford; 'but I think, if we read the Bible, we shall find that all persons have sinned, and come short of the glory of God: it is said repeatedly. We sometimes fancy we are good, because we are not aware how perfect we ought to be. You know we are to keep the commandments of God, and to walk

Digitized by Google

in them all the days of our life. Not to keep one or two commandments sometimes, but all of them at all times.'

'It is impossible,' sighed Madeline. But Ruth said nothing.

'Imagine what you would be if you were to keep all God's commandments,' continued Mr Clifford: 'you would get up early in the morning, and your first thought would be about Him, and His goodness in taking care of you; you would say your prayers without any wandering thoughts; all the day you would be endeavouring to please Him; you would never use an unkind word, or give way to a proud thought, but you would be humble and gentle, constantly trying to do what you could to make other persons happy, and never seeking your own pleasure instead of theirs. When you read the Bible, you would not do it irreverently, as if it were a common book, but as if you really felt and believed that it was God's holy word; and besides this, you would never be envious nor discontented, but you would take everything that happened quite cheerfully, because it was ordered by God. Least of all, would you ever for an instant attempt to deceive, or say anything which was not strictly true, or do anything which you thought your mamma and I should not like?' Poor Madeline felt so guilty as her papa spoke, that her cheek became of a burning colour; and Mr Clifford remarked it. 'You are not well, my love,' he said, anxiously.

'Oh yes, papa! indeed I am—quite; only it is so hot.'

It was the second time that Madeline had been tempted to say what approached to an untruth, and from the same cause, —a wish to conceal another fault; so dangerous is it ever to yield in the least matters.

'We will come into the open air,' said Mr Clifford, 'under the beech-tree; I think it is rather too warm here for comfort.' Madeline liked the summer-house better than the beech-tree, but she did not dare object, and they went. Ruth was thinking upon what had been said; it had given her a clearer idea than she had possessed before of what was meant by being really good—keeping God's commandments; and she began to suspect, that after all she might not be so perfect as she was sometimes inclined to imagine. 'There is no use in wishing to be good, then, papa,' she said.

Mr Clifford seemed a little pained. 'But if we have promised, Ruth,' he said, 'and if, when we promised, God gave us His Holy Spirit to help us, what are we to say then?'

'But we cannot be quite—quite good,' said Madeline, who

Digitized by Google

was trying in her own mind to find some excuse for her late naughty behaviour.

'Not quite,' replied Mr Clifford, 'but always endeavouring to be; which is all that God requires of us, when He requires us to promise that we will keep His holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of our life. How good, indeed, we might be, if we were to serve God from the beginning of our lives, He alone can tell; certainly, very, very much better than we are; and that is the reason, my dear children, why I am so desirous that you should commence early.'

'When we go to school?' said Madeline.

'No,' replied Mr Clifford, 'now—this very moment. Perhaps you will not live to go to school.' Madeline was frightened. It seemed more dreadful then to think that she might die than it had ever done before; yet, with her usual thoughtlessness, she forgot her dread as Ruth began asking some more questions about Mrs Carter, and where she lived, and how old her mamma was when she went to school; and at last, when Ruth ran away to meet her mamma in one of the walks, Madeline ran too, and was soon talking as fast as if nothing was the matter.

CHAPTER IX.

A FEW days afterwards, Mrs Clifford was seated in the drawing-room at the Manor, conversing with Lady Catharine Hyde, and Madeline and Alice were together in the school-room. Ruth had a cold, and was therefore kept at home; and Madeline was not very sorry for this, because she wished extremely to see Alice alone, and to prevail on her, if possible, to allow the sashes to be shewn to Mrs Clifford. She had an excellent opportunity on this occasion, for they were sent out of the room, and told not to return till they were summoned; and nearly an hour elapsed before any one came to them. All this time Lady Catharine and Mrs Clifford were engaged in an interesting conversation; Mrs Clifford was repeating to Lady Catharine the history of Miss Beresford's intended marriage, and the difference it was likely to make in the plans for the education of Ruth and Madeline; and Lady Catharine was giving Mrs Clifford some idea of her thoughts

*

Digitized by Google

and wishes about Alice. Lady Catharine's notions did not, indeed, entirely suit Mrs Clifford; she considered some of them strange and not likely to answer, but she was pleased to hear them, because of the deep interest she took in the child, who had been the playfellow of her own little girls; and who seemed left without the usual advantage of near relations to take charge of her. Lady Catharine thought Mrs Clifford perfectly right in all she meant to do, and inquired many particulars of Mrs Carter's school; saying, that if she were ever obliged to part from Alice, it would be a satisfaction to know some place to which she might be sent without danger; 'not that I have the least idea at present,' she continued, 'of making any change in Alice's life; if I do, it will be entirely from her own fault.'

'She seems gentle and well-disposed,' observed Mrs Clifford.

'Yes, I think she is,' replied Lady Catharine; 'at least, if she has a bad temper, she never ventures to exhibit it either to Marsham or me; and she is quick at her lessons, and obliging, and contented; but all this is not sufficient for me, my dear Mrs Clifford; I must have sincerity; and sincerity, I am sadly afraid, Alice does not possess.'

'She has not had much care, then, taken of her, I suppose,' answered Mrs Clifford.

'Yes, indeed, she has, at least till within the last year, just as much care as you, or I, or any one else. She could have learned nothing that was evil from '—— Lady Catharine paused—even then, after so many months, she could not mention Mrs Lennox's name without tears. 'I wish but for two things,' she added—'truth and obedience; so long as I have these I am contented, but if I ever have reason to suspect that Alice is deficient in them, in truth especially, I shall think it my duty to send her away to some place where she will have fewer indulgences.'

'I do not see that she can have many temptations to do wrong here,' said Mrs Clifford; 'she has seldom any companions.'

'No; but if it is in a child's heart to be deceitful, she is sure to find out some occasion of being so; and Alice, I am afraid, was taught much that was bad by that foolish woman, Benson. At any rate, I have so arranged that I shall soon discover whether she is really to be trusted. I have given her one command—a very easy one, which if she should break, my confidence in her will be gone, and then the sooner she leaves Haseley Manor the better. The discipline of a school will in such a

Digitized by Google

case be the only fit education for her.' Mrs Clifford knew what command Lady Catharine meant, but before she could tell exactly what to reply, Lady Catharine went on: 'There are, you know, some rooms in this house for which I have a peculiar feeling of reverence. The happiest moments of my life were spent in them; and, since my earthly joy has been destroyed, I have taken a kind of sacred pleasure in keeping them just as they were during my dear husband's lifetime; all his books, and pictures, and writings, remain in precisely the same position as when he left them, and so it is my wish that they should continue till my death. Perhaps it may be a fancy—a very peculiar one, but still I have it strongly, and I do not see why I should not indulge it. I have therefore forbidden any of my servants, except Marsham, to go into these rooms, under any pretence whatever; and the same order I have given to Alice, and if she should disobey it, I shall have no difficulty in finding it out immediately: it is her trial, and upon her going through it well must depend, not my affection (that can never change, for I love her for her mother's sake), but my trust in her. The rooms are often locked, but at times they are purposely left open; and hitherto I have had no cause to think that Alice has been ungrateful enough to disregard my wishes.'

At this account, part of which only was new, Mrs Clifford felt uncomfortable. She did not agree with Lady Catharine, as to its being a good thing to put any such temptation in Alice's way; but she was not asked to give her opinion, and Lady Catharine's very decided manner made every one shy of differing from her. Yet Mrs Clifford was so honest and open in her character, that she could not prevent her feelings from being expressed in her countenance, and Lady Catharine immediately inquired whether she had any reason for suspecting that Alice had, as yet, been guilty of deception.

'Oh! no, none in the least; I was only thinking that if the door were kept locked, it might be safer. To see it open must excite her curiosity.'

'That is the very point. As she grows older she will constantly meet with temptations of the kind, and it is right that she should be early trained to resist them; at any rate (and Lady Catharine drew herself up) it is my will.' There was nothing to be said against this, and if there had been, Mrs Clifford saw that nothing was to be gained by an attempt at argument. Lady Catharine had a natural fancy for trying

Digitized by Google

experiments, doing things in a different way from every one else; and as she had succeeded in making the cottagers rear chickens, and raise potatoes, according to her own peculiar views, so she imagined that she should also succeed in educating Alice Lennox.

In the meantime, Alice and Madeline had been tolerably amused and happy. Not as happy as they were before either of them had had anything to conceal, but still rather merry than not. Madeline did as she had resolved: she asked Alice to consent that the sashes should be shown to her mamma; and so far she did right; but when Alice refused, she did not trouble herself any more about the matter. Both were very well contented to make out a game with the bonbons, which Alice had left—a game in which Alice kept a shop and sold them, and Madeline went to buy, and paid for them with some shells which had been picked up on the shore. After a little while, Alice began to think that it would be pleasanter to go into the passage, and play upon a high window seat which had two steps up to it, and this accordingly they did. Alice took a number of other pretty things, pincushions, and beads, and coloured papers, out of her play drawer, in order to make what she called a bazaar; and when they were all spread out they looked extremely gay, and Madeline was delighted, and heartily wished that Ruth had been there too. By and by, however, they grew a little weary, and sitting down on the steps they began talking; whilst Alice amused herself by tossing the bonbons up in the air, and catching them again in her hand. Presently, one fell on the floor, and, being round, it rolled along the ground and behind a door which stood a little way open. Alice started up, gathering the remainder of the bonbons together in her lap: 'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'it is gone, quite gone, and into that passage; what shall I do?'

'Why? what do you mean?' said Madeline, 'we shall find it directly.'

'No, no,' exclaimed Alice, hastily, and catching hold of Madeline's frock, she prevented her from moving; 'don't you remember? I told you just now that is the very door, the way into those rooms? I don't dare go.' Madeline looked rather aghast.

'If Lady Catharine finds the bonbon there, she will think you have been in,' she said.

'No, not if I tell her how it happened. If it were a ball or

Digitized by Google

anything, I should not care, but one of those stupid bonbons. What shall I do? How I wish I had never had them! and I don't like them so very much now, there is a nasty taste in the chocolate.'

'If Lady Catharine asks how you came by them, what shall you say?' inquired Madeline.

'Oh! the truth, I must, of course—that you gave them to me.'

'And mamma will hear about it, and be angry,' continued Madeline; 'and perhaps she won't let me keep the sashes, if she knows how we exchanged. Oh, that tiresome bonbon!'

'There is no use in talking of all that,' said Alice; 'what shall we do now?'

'Yes, what shall we do?' It was a question which neither of the children knew how to answer.

At length Alice said, 'It must be just behind the door; looking for it there won't be going into the rooms.'

'No,' said Madeline; 'let me go, and I shall find it, I daresay.' Alice hesitated a little; she fancied that Madeline would not see as well as herself, and perhaps would only roll it along farther, or do something equally awkward; for Madeline was rather famous for doing awkward things. 'If it were known,' continued Madeline, 'Lady Catharine would not scold me as she would you.'

'But,' exclaimed Alice, who, with all her faults, was not ungenerous, 'I should not like that. The bonbon is mine, and I threw it there, and if any one goes for it I must.'

'You must be quick then,' said Madeline, 'mamma won't stay much longer.' Alice stood upon the step, uncertain how to act. 'You need not go in, only just peep round,' said Madeline; 'but make haste.' The slamming of a door was heard at the same instant, and Alice thought Lady Catharine was coming.

'I can't go,' she said, and she reseated herself. But again there was stillness, the slamming of the door was merely accidental, and there were no signs of Lady Catharine or Mrs Clifford.

'Now, then,' half whispered Madeline, who, to do her justice, felt more for Alice than for herself; 'don't go in, but just try behind for it.'

Alice moved slowly forward, pushed back the forbidden door, and put out her hand in hopes of feeling the missing bonbon;

Digitized by Google

but no, it was not to be felt, and she was obliged to advance one step into the passage. Still it was in vain, and the next moment Alice was fairly within, searching for it in every direction. The light was not very clear, for it came through a stained glass window, and in the passage—which was broad, but not long—there were some old lumbering pieces of furniture. Alice was about to give up looking, and resign herself to her fate, when her foot touched something small and round, and the bonbon rolled away still farther. Alice thought she could not then give it up as lost; but again it was nowhere to be seen, and Madeline, who was keeping watch, became frightened, and, fancying she heard some one coming, entreated Alice in a loud whisper to return. Alice, however, notwithstanding her fears, was now too curious and too interested to listen. She had disobeyed, and she must take the consequences; and since she had ventured so far, she was resolved to take one peep round the corner, although with a very faint hope of finding what she wanted. Heedless, therefore, of Madeline's words, she moved a few steps, and then saw to her disappointment that a door, apparently closed, prevented any farther advance. The bonbon, too, was gone—or, at least, it was beyond her reach; for, on stooping down, she saw it safely resting far underneath a very heavy ebony cabinet, which it would have been impossible for any single person to move. Alice was so far satisfied that she was nearly sure no one would notice it; but, now she was there, would it not be worth while just to push aside the door, and see what was to be discovered within? Certainly it was a great temptation. The door stood ajar; and, without delay, Alice put out her hand, and it was opened. There were the forbidden rooms—two, opening one into the other; large and high, and hung with crimson curtains; and panelled by a dark, oak wainscot. They were handsome and gloomy, like many in the other parts of the house, except that there were more pictures, and larger ones, against the walls than were to be seen elsewhere, and that, at the bottom of the inner room, there was a glass reaching from the ceiling to the floor. Chairs there were also, and tables, and a writing-desk, and books, and pens, and papers, and an inkstand, besides a heavy leathern arm-chair—pushed aside, as if some one had only just risen from it. And yet years had gone by since any one had sat in that chair, or used those pens, or opened those books. Since the day when Mr Hyde was seized with the ill-

Digitized by Google

ness which caused his death, not one of the articles which lay upon his table, or were used for the furnishing of his room, had ever been displaced. Many, many changes had there been since in his native village; old houses were demolished, and new ones built up; walls were raised, and gardens planted, and trees were cut down and sold; even in his own home there were alterations in the walks and shrubberies, and changes in the arrangements of the house, but still there remained the scattered papers, and the pen resting in the inkstand, and the old-fashioned easy-chair, precisely in the position in which they had all been left on that fearful, sorrowing day, which had been the most miserable of Lady Catharine Hyde's existence. Alice knew this, and she felt it; even at that time, when she was so full of haste and alarm, she felt that there was something strange and awful in looking at things just as they had been used and left by one who was long since gone to the unseen world. A shuddering came over her, and, without attempting to move, she stood at the entrance, with her eyes fixed upon the large glass, which by reflection increased the length of the apartments. The house was always quiet; but now there was not the least sound, not even the ticking of a clock, to disturb the stillness of those solemn chambers, which seemed to belong, not to the living, but the dead. Alice was frightened; a thought, a horrible thought, entered her head. It had been the will of God that he who had lived in those rooms should die almost suddenly. It might be His will that she should die also; and if it were, should she be ready to go? Was she really honest, and true, and earnest; trying to do everything she knew was right, and practising no deceit? Would God indeed receive her as His child, 'a member of Christ, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven?' or would He cast her away with those terrible words, 'Depart from me, I know you not.' The questions take some moments to write, but only one to think; and when Alice had thought, a wretched remembrance of all her naughty actions came across her, and in an agony of terror she turned away and ran back along the passage. The door at the end was nearly closed, and Alice softly called Madeline, but no Madeline answered. She peeped out, but no one was in the gallery; only Lady Catharine's voice in the hall below was heard repeating her name angrily. Alice ran out, and at the same instant a door near her was opened, and Anne, the housemaid, Benson's cousin, met her.

Digitized by Google

Alice blushed and trembled, and would have willingly passed, but she was stopped.

'Miss Alice! out of that passage! What will my mistress say?'

Alice's face became white with fear. 'Anne—pray—you won't—you can't tell,' she exclaimed; 'I only went to look for'——

'Alice—Alice—where is Miss Lennox?' asked Lady Catharine from below.

'Hark! I must go—it would be so cruel—Anne, pray—pray,' and poor Alice caught hold of the girl's hand entreatingly.

'Well! there, we 'll see—I can't tell—don't pinch so, Miss Alice.'

Lady Catharine's step was heard ascending the staircase, and Alice felt as if she should have fallen to the ground. She looked so ill that Anne saw it would not do to trifle with her, and, hastily whispering, 'Don't look so, Miss Alice, pray don't look so—nobody will tell,' she left her.

Alice did not stay a moment longer, but, summoning all her courage, she ran down-stairs, and met Lady Catharine just as she reached the first landing-place. 'Did you want me? I thought I heard some one calling me,' she said, in as free and open a manner as she could put on.

Lady Catharine looked exceedingly displeased. 'Yes, Alice,' she said, 'I did want you, but it is too late now; Mrs Clifford and Madeline are gone. Strange behaviour, indeed, it is to leave your young companion by herself, and not to take the trouble to come and wish her good-bye.'

'It was only for a minute,' replied Alice; 'and I did not know she was going so soon.'

'Madeline Clifford is very good-natured,' continued Lady Catharine, 'and she tried to make the best of it; but I could see from her way of talking that she was vexed; and you look strange, too; I am afraid you have been quarrelling.'

'Oh no, no!' exclaimed Alice, 'indeed we have not; I like Madeline—I like to play with her very much.'

'Then you must be careful in your behaviour; Mrs Clifford will never allow her little girls to come here to be neglected. What have you here?' and Lady Catharine put her hand upon the bonbons, which Alice still held in her frock: this was the climax of Alice's alarm, for she had forgotten them till then.

Digitized by Google

She paused, and looked confused, and many thoughts rushed instantly to her mind; and the next moment she said, in a clear, firm voice, 'They are Madeline's: we have been playing with them.'

'Oh,' was all Lady Catharine's reply; 'then I shall keep them, and return them to her the first opportunity; and I shall tell her that for the future she must not bring such things here: I do not approve of your eating them.'

Alice silently delivered up the bonbons, and Lady Catharine told her to go to the school-room and finish her lessons, as she wished to take her with her into the village in the evening. Alice obeyed, and for the first moment with a relieved mind; but immediately afterwards a dark cloud of miserable feelings overpowered her. She had escaped a present danger, but at what a price! she had told a lie, firmly, openly, without any hesitation; she had spoken words which were utterly false. A deadly sin, perhaps the greatest a child can commit, was on her conscience, and how could she know a moment's happiness? And was it likely that she could remain without being found out? Madeline would surely speak the truth at once; and even if Lady Catharine were to forgive the grievous fault, which she would then discover, there still remained the lost bonbon behind the ebony cabinet, which at any instant might be the means of betraying her act of disobedience in entering the forbidden rooms; or, what was still more possible, the housemaid might take it into her head to tell upon her, and so be the means of her losing Lady Catharine's favour for ever. Alice had many faults, but she had also by nature a warm heart, and it was this idea more than any other which made her utterly wretched.

CHAPTER X.

CAN it be supposed that Madeline was happy when she returned home, and met Ruth's bright, smiling face, and heard her declare that she had been longing for her to come back; that she wanted of all things to know all they had been saying and doing; and to hear if Alice had asked after her, or seemed sorry that she was not there? Madeline, for almost the first time in her life, was unwilling to stay with Ruth; she

Digitized by Google

did not like to see her—indeed she did not like to see any one. It was very true that she had done nothing so wrong as Alice, but her fault, her folly, in wishing for the sashes was at the beginning of the mischief, and the belief that she was the only person who was aware of Alice's disobedience made her feel uneasy. If Alice were discovered, she might be blamed also; and oh! how heartily did Madeline now repent having indulged that first seemingly little sin, a taste for the vanity of dress.

Madeline's unhappiness, however, though it was noticed, was not thought strange by her papa and mamma, especially when, the next day, a letter arrived from Mrs Beresford, accepting the invitation to Laneton; and another from Mrs Carter, saying that she was very willing to take charge of the two children, and that at the end of September she expected to have two vacancies in her school, which would enable her to receive them. Ruth and her sister were not positively told that it was fixed for them to go, but it was considered almost as a certainty; and neither Mr nor Mrs Clifford felt surprised that they should both at times look grave at the prospect of soon leaving their home. Mr Clifford did not allow this idea to interfere with their usual way of going on; they were still kept to their lessons, and required to attend to their regular duties, for he knew that it could neither be for their improvement nor their happiness to have their minds unsettled; and this, perhaps, was rather a comfort to Madeline. It occupied her; and she had not so much time for wondering how Alice was engaged, or whether her disobedience had been found out; and though something was constantly happening to recall to her thoughts what had been done, yet she was less uneasy than she would have been if she had had nothing to divert her mind. Madeline was growing used to the feeling of having something to hide; it was dreadful to her at first, but by degrees it grew less and less painful: and it is the way with us all; but it is not because we do not see our faults, or think about them, that we are really good in the eyes of God; rather we ought to be very much frightened at ourselves when we find that we are becoming accustomed to doing wrong. Occasionally, however, Madeline's conscience seemed to wake up, as it were, and reproach her? but this was not, as might have been expected, when she knelt down at night, and in the morning, to say her prayers: for persons soon become accustomed to repeating the most solemn words without

Digitized by Google

any thought of what they mean; neither was it when she read over a list of questions which her mamma had drawn out to help her to remember what she had been doing, and whether she had been careless, or deceitful, or cross, or inattentive at her prayers and Scripture reading, or otherwise sinful. Madeline, as yet, did not know the real use of this habit of what is called self-examination—how necessary it is for every one who would live so as to please God—she read the questions over, as a matter of course; and sometimes one or two things would suggest themselves, but she did not in general try very much to remember, and now there was something which she would rather have forgotten.

The occasions when Madeline did feel that she had been behaving ill were when her papa was talking to her. Mr Clifford's manner was so earnest and reverent, and yet so affectionate, that it was impossible for any one to listen to him without paying attention; and Madeline loved her papa dearly; and when she reflected that if he knew what she had done he would be vexed and unhappy, she was vexed and unhappy herself. This feeling was increased to the utmost one afternoon when she had been for a walk with Ruth and her papa. On their return Mr Clifford proposed that instead of going at once to the parsonage, they should turn down the lane which led to the sea-side, and rest a little while on a ledge of low rocks, which always afforded a dry seat. It was not quite high tide, but the waves were stealing in nearer and nearer, rippling gently over the sand, and sparkling as they caught the rays of the evening sun, which was sinking low in the western sky, and casting a long line of golden light across the smooth waters of the bay. There was something soft and soothing in the stillness and beauty of the scene and the hour; something which Madeline and Ruth felt, though they did not speak of it. They became more silent, and their steps were slower; and instead of wandering away to look for sea-weed, or gather pebbles, they stayed contentedly by Mr Clifford's side, waiting till he should choose to speak; but they waited for a long, or at least what seemed to them a long time. Mr Clifford's eyes were fixed upon the far distant line, which, indeed, could scarcely be distinguished, where the deep colours of the sea melted away into the paler tint of the sky, and he seemed to be in deep meditation. Perhaps he was thinking upon the awfulness of that glorious work of God, the broad, deep ocean;

Digitized by Google

so broad that millions and millions of human beings might find space to travel over its surface together; and so vast and deep, that they might all in an instant sink beneath it and perish, and yet not a single mark remain to tell where they had died: or he might have been considering the immensity of the sky which was above him and around him; how it was formed by the same Being who made the little insects which we tread under our feet, and how that Almighty God, the Lord and Creator of all things, had in His wonderful mercy given up His blessedness and His power, and condescended to live in this sinful world, and die in agony and shame for the sinners who had rebelled against Him. Some such thoughts were certainly in Mr Clifford's mind, for they were there constantly; he had learned to remember God everywhere; and all the beautiful things which he saw in nature brought with them some idea of religion, in the same way as the presents given us by friends teach us to recollect, and love, and feel grateful to them. Yet Mr Clifford's look was different from usual; he had a sense of something painful which was going to happen; and when, after his long silence, he turned to speak to his children, his voice was not really cheerful, though he tried to make it so. 'A few more weeks,' he said, 'and then you will probably have very different things to look at, Ruth: how do you think you shall like all the gay carriages, and horses, and the fine shops, and the crowds of people, and the noise and bustle of London!'

'I shall be glad to see it all,' said Ruth, in a timid voice, as if unwilling for her papa to suppose that she was looking forward to any pleasure in going from home.

'That is right, my dear child,' he replied, 'always speak the truth. You don't dislike the notion of going to school as much as you did, do you?'

'No, papa, not the going to school; but the going away from you I do, just as much.'

'School will not be at all unpleasant to you, if you make a point of doing all that you are told, and being quite sincere in everything you say,' replied Mr Clifford.

'Mamma says Mrs Carter is very kind, and is not fond of making rules,' said Madeline.

'No, and so you ought to be the more particular. But do you know, Madeline, my fear for you both is, not that you will do great naughty things, but little ones.'

Digitized by Google

'Oh, papa, why?' exclaimed the children together; 'it can't signify half as much.'

'Perhaps not; but I think you are tolerably safe from some great sins—lying and stealing, for instance; but I do not think you are at all safe from what are thought little ones—indolence, and pettishness, and carelessness, and equivocation; and shall I say pride, Ruth, or is that one of the greater offences?' Ruth blushed.

'But if we never do anything more than these little things, we shall be pretty good,' said Madeline.

'But, my dear Madeline,' replied Mr Clifford, 'we are not told in the Bible to be pretty good, but very good; perfect, even as our Father which is in heaven is perfect.'

'And will God be angry with us just the same as if we did tell lies and steal?' asked Ruth gravely.

'Little sins unchecked, Ruth, become great. You know, in cases of illness, people die from the results of colds and seemingly trifling complaints, as well as from dreadful accidents, or the plague, or horrible fevers; and so we may die what is called in the Bible the second death, not because we have apparently anything very shocking the matter with our souls, but because by giving way to little sins we have brought ourselves to a state in which we have no love to God in our hearts.'

Madeline considered for an instant, and then said, 'Carelessness does not seem to be very naughty.'

'Few of our faults seem to be very naughty,' answered Mr Clifford, 'and that is the danger. I daresay Cain's fault in being envious of his brother, because he had more of God's favour than himself, did not seem very naughty—it was only something in his mind; but if envy was the beginning of his sin, murder was the end.'

'Oh! but, papa,' exclaimed Ruth, 'it would be quite impossible for us to be like Cain.'

'Indeed, Ruth! I cannot see it. It is not impossible for us to be anything that is wicked, if we do not try, by the help of God's grace, to keep ourselves in that state of salvation in which we were placed at our baptism.'

'I don't understand about a state of salvation,' said Madeline, quickly; 'I never do when we say it in the catechism.'

Mr Clifford did not reply immediately; he seemed to be occupied in watching a boat which was just putting off from the shore. Old Roger was in it, and one of his grandsons; and

Digitized by Google

after a slight exertion, it was pushed into the deep water, and the two men, with their oars skimming the waves, were swiftly borne away over the sea. 'It looks smooth and pleasant,' observed Mr Clifford, as his eye followed the boat till it dwindled almost to a speck; 'but I am afraid there is a storm coming up: do you see that black cloud in the west?' The children looked in the direction in which their papa pointed, and, though not experienced in the signs of the weather, saw at once that a change was to be expected. 'I am always rather in alarm when old Roger goes out,' said Mr Clifford, 'he is so helpless; and William is a mere child in point of strength, especially since he had that bad fever.'

'But the boat is such a beautiful one, papa,' said Ruth, 'quite new; I heard Roger say yesterday, that it would take a great deal to upset it.'

'Yes, that is very true,' replied Mr Clifford; 'and, whatever storms may arise, as long as he can keep in the boat, he will be safe; but a little carelessness, or the violence of some unexpected gust, may put him in fearful danger. There is one thing, however, which would make me trust Roger more than any other fisherman on this coast—he is always on the look-out.' Mr Clifford stopped to see whether his children at all understood what he meant by speaking in this way. Madeline was amusing herself with some pebbles which she held in her lap, and did not appear to notice that her father had left off talking; but Ruth looked at him, and said, 'Papa, are you really thinking much about old Roger?'

Mr Clifford smiled. 'Why should you doubt it, Ruth? I am thinking a little about him; but, perhaps, I am thinking more about you and Madeline.'

'About us, papa?' exclaimed Madeline; 'nothing can come to hurt us.'

'Is it, indeed, so?' asked Mr Clifford, in a grave tone; 'what should you say to Roger, if he laughed at the notion of guarding against a storm, because he is now safe in his boat? would you not call him foolish and presumptuous, and warn him, that his not being in danger at this moment is no reason why he may not be so in the next?'

'Is that like us, and our doing wrong?' said Ruth.

'Yes,' replied Mr Clifford, and his face brightened with pleasure; 'just now, Madeline said that she could not understand about a state of salvation, but now, perhaps, she will be able to

Digitized by Google

do it. If a storm were to come on, Roger Dyson would not be safe, because he is on the sea; his boat might be upset, and he might be drowned; but as long as he could keep in the boat, he would be in a state of salvation—that is, a state in which, if he were to continue, he would be saved. Now there are other dangers much more terrible, of which the stormy sea is a type or figure, and through which every one who is born into the world has to pass, before he can reach heaven. These dangers, as you well know, arise from our own evil inclinations, and the temptations of the devil; and in order that we may be enabled to escape them, God, in his great mercy, has placed us all in a state of salvation. How has he done this?'

'By letting us be baptized,' replied Ruth.

'Exactly so; when we were baptized we were taken into what is called in the Prayer Book the Ark of Christ's Church.'

'Like Noah,' said Madeline, eager to show that she understood something of what was said.

'Yes, like Noah,' replied her papa: 'we were not, indeed, taken away from our friends—there was no change in our homes; what was done for us, was done in our hearts by the gift of God's Holy Spirit. But outwardly there are some great advantages granted to all persons who are baptized. Those who are not cannot, for instance, be admitted to the Holy Communion, and cannot, therefore, receive the especial blessings which God gives us through that sacred rite. The sprinkling with water at the font; the signing with the cross; the being brought up to go to church and join in public worship; and the being taught to read the Bible and learn the catechism; and then being confirmed and allowed to receive the Holy Communion, are outward marks of our having been taken into the Ark of Christ's Church, and so being in a state of salvation.'

'Then I am sure we are in a state of salvation, papa,' exclaimed Madeline, 'because we go to church every Sunday, and we can say the catechism all through.'

'Except the duty towards your neighbour,' observed Ruth; 'you can't say that, Madeline.'

'No, all but that, it is so long; but I can say it a great deal better than I did.'

'And we shall be confirmed when we are old enough, papa,' added Ruth.

'Yes, I hope so, my dear: and yet you may do all this—

Digitized by Google

you may say your catechism, and repeat your prayers, and read the Bible; and you may even grow up to be confirmed and to receive the Holy Communion, and still, in the sight of God, not be in a state of salvation—the inward mark may be wanting.'

'We ought to be good too,' said Ruth.

'Yes, good in your hearts—in all your thoughts, and words, and deeds—trying earnestly, and praying constantly, for the help of God's Holy Spirit: if you do this, all the privileges of religion will be an unspeakable good to you; but if you do not, they will only make you worse, because you will be hypocrites.'

'Hypocrites are grown-up people, are they not?' inquired Madeline.

'Very often they are; but children can be like hypocrites. When they know they have been doing naughty things, and kneel down to say their prayers without being sorry, or when they say they are sorry, and don't try to behave better—then they act like hypocrites. Or when they do what they know will please their friends whilst they are with them, and disobey them when they are out of sight, they resemble hypocrites. There are many ways in which children can be hypocritical.'

'I should be very sorry to be a hypocrite,' said Ruth.

'Not so sorry as I should be to see you one, Ruth. I mean, really one—going on constantly in deceit, and yet pretending to be good.' If Mr Clifford had looked at Madeline as he spoke, he would have seen her countenance change, and her hands tremble as she tried to lift some pebbles which lay in her lap. The thought that she was a hypocrite was very dreadful; but what had her papa said? He had told them, that those were really hypocrites who went on deceiving, while they pretended to be good; and she had gone on for days, and even weeks, keeping what she was afraid to show even to Ruth, encouraging Alice in deceit; and, at the same time, saying her prayers every night and morning, and reading the Bible, and listening to all her papa and mamma said very attentively, rather more so, indeed, than usual. It seemed extremely like hypocrisy; but that was such a dreadful word, surely it could scarcely be meant for her. There was a question which she very much wished to ask, but she did not dare, for she could not lift up her eyes. Ruth, however, put it for her:—'Are hypocrites in a state of salvation, then, papa?' she said.

Digitized by Google

'We cannot decide about any persons whilst they are living,' replied her father; 'so long as they are members of the Church, they certainly are not cast out of the state of salvation in the sight of men, but in the eye of God we know they may be. The condition of a wicked person is, in our sight, as if Roger's boat were to be tossed about till it was all but upset; you would be very much frightened for him; but he would not be without any hope of safety.'

'I should not like to see him so nearly falling into the water at all,' said Ruth.

'No, and neither should we like to see the danger we are in ourselves when we persist in doing wrong. It is very, very fearful; for death, we know, may be really as near to us, as it would appear to be to Roger, if he were struggling in the stormy sea, and a wave were just about to pass over him. And the condition of men who die without having sought God's forgiveness through the merits of our blessed Saviour is more awful than we can bear to think of.' Madeline felt more frightened than ever; she moved a little farther from her papa, that he might not observe her. 'The reason I talk to you in this way,' continued Mr Clifford, 'is not because I am afraid you are very wicked now, but because I am afraid lest you should become so. You are watched over carefully here, and have not much opportunity of doing wrong, but it will be different at school.'

'It would take a long time to make us very wicked, papa,' said Ruth.

'No, Ruth, indeed it is not so; whilst we are heartily trying to do God's will, we may trust that the Holy Spirit will be given us to keep us from harm; but the moment we leave off trying, we have no reason any longer to hope that God will help us; and when we are left to ourselves, we shall most certainly go on doing worse and worse. It is the beginning of sin which we have to dread; the unkind word, or vain thought, or deceitful action, which, like the whistling of the wind, tells us that a storm is near. If we do not guard against this, it may end by upsetting our boat and plunging us into the sea; or, in other words, by casting us out of that state of salvation in which the mercy of God placed us at our baptism. And now, Madeline,' continued Mr Clifford, 'you have been saying very little; but can you understand better than you did what is meant by a state of salvation?'

Madeline answered in a low voice, 'Yes;' and her papa,

Digitized by Google

thinking she felt shy, drew her towards him, and kissing her, said, 'I should like to hear you say that answer in the catechism, which mentions our being in a state of salvation, and then we must think of going home. We have been talking of the storm, and I really think it is coming. The question is—"Dost thou not think that thou art bound to believe and to do as they (that is, your godfathers and godmothers) have promised for thee?" What is the answer?' Poor Madeline had never before found it so hard to speak. Twice she began, and then stopped and stammered. Mr Clifford smiled kindly, and said, 'Is it quite gone out of your head? Suppose you help her, Ruth.'

But Madeline did not choose to be helped, and this time as she began, the words came more easily, and she went on without hesitation. '"Yes, verily; and by God's help so I will. And I heartily thank our Heavenly Father, that He hath called me to this state of salvation, through Jesus Christ our Saviour. And I pray unto God to give me His grace, that I may continue in the same unto my life's end."'

Mr Clifford rose from his seat when Madeline finished speaking, and as he turned to look once more for the fisherman's boat, which was still seen as a speck in the distance, he said, 'Yes, there is nothing but prayer for God's help which can keep us safe from the storms of the sea, or the storms of sin. You will find it thus as you grow older, though now, I daresay, you often wonder why so much is said about the duty of praying constantly.'

Madeline murmured something in reply, but very indistinctly. 'We never forget our prayers, papa,' said Ruth.

'No, my love, I trust not, indeed; but prayers, if they are not said carefully and earnestly, are but a mockery.'

'Can people ever be so good as not to think of other things at all, when they are saying their prayers?' asked Ruth.

'No,' replied her papa; 'I do not think they can. The devil puts thoughts into the minds of even the best persons, but they are very sorry for it, and do not attend to them; and when we are afraid that God will not hear us because we do not pray rightly, we must remember that we end all our petitions in the name of our blessed Saviour. If we endeavour to keep our thoughts from wandering, God for His sake will accept us.'

'I should like to be very good,' said Ruth; 'very good indeed, I mean, like the holy persons, the saints, whom mamma reads to us about sometimes.'

Digitized by Google

Mr Clifford smiled, and then he stopped and looked at Madeline. 'And you, Madeline,' he said, 'should you not like to be very good too?'

Madeline was by this time extremely unhappy. Her papa's serious manner had made her sensible how infinitely important it was to be good; a truth which, when she was away from him, she was often inclined to forget. She was conscious that she had been wrong, not only in taking the sashes, and giving Alice the bonbons, when she knew that Lady Catharine would not like it, but also in a great many other instances; and whilst her voice faltered, and the tears fell down her cheeks, she said, 'I never shall be very good, if I try ever so hard.'

Mr Clifford did not seem pained or surprised at this speech: he took no notice of it then, for the storm which he had been fearing was now coming nearer; some heavy drops of rain were falling, and the muttered roll of thunder was heard from the black clouds which were gathering over the sea. When they reached home, however, he made Madeline go with him into his study, and taking her upon his knee, he began to talk so kindly, that Madeline's distress increased. Mr Clifford entreated her to be comforted, and to tell him what made her so unhappy, but her sobs prevented her from answering. At length he said, 'If it is anything wrong which you have done, my dear child, it will be far better and happier to say it at once.'

Madeline's tears suddenly ceased, a deep flush spread itself over her neck and forehead, and, hiding her face upon her father's shoulder, she exclaimed, 'It was very wrong in me, I know, papa, now—but it did not seem much then.' Mr Clifford perceived that some confession was at hand, but he did not like to press her, and Madeline continued in the same hurried manner: 'Mamma lets us wear sashes sometimes, and I thought she would not care, and Alice liked the bonbons, so I gave'—— but before Madeline could finish her sentence, a knock was heard at the door, and Ruth begged to know if she might come in.

'Here is a note for you, papa, just sent from the Manor: Lady Catharine's servant is waiting for an answer.'

Madeline had no sooner heard the word Manor, than her thoughts turned to Alice. 'Oh! papa,' she exclaimed in great agitation, 'pray don't let Lady Catharine be angry. Alice did not mean any harm, it was my fault—indeed it was: I gave her the bonbons; please beg her not to be angry.'

Digitized by Google

'I cannot understand all this, Madeline,' replied Mr Clifford: 'Lady Catharine begs me to go to her instantly, so I must know in few words what you have been doing.'

Notwithstanding the grave and decided tone in which her papa spoke, Madeline was relieved at having at length an occasion for freeing her conscience. She began at the first visit which they had paid to the Manor, and gave a history of all that had passed; ending with, 'I would rather a great deal be punished than Alice.'

Mr Clifford was silent for a moment when Madeline finished speaking, and then he said, 'I cannot talk to you upon this subject now, Madeline; probably I shall not be very long at the Manor, but I shall tell your mamma that you must stay here till I return;' and he left the room. Madeline was panic-struck; she had never seen him seriously angry before. Yet it was not exactly anger; his voice was quiet and gentle, but it was plain that he thought the affair of consequence.

When the door was closed the two children looked at each other in fear, and Ruth exclaimed, 'O Madeline! how could you do it?'

'I don't know—I can't tell,' sobbed Madeline; 'it did not seem very naughty.'

'I said you had better not,' continued Ruth, proud of her own superior judgment; 'I said mamma would not like it, and you know she is sorry for your caring to be dressed out. And then to keep it so quiet—not to mention a word! not to me! it was so very unkind.'

'I thought you would tell, and I meant to show them by and by—and—but it would not have signified if Alice had not gone into the room—do you think Lady Catharine knows that?'

'I daresay she does,' replied Ruth; 'and that she will be horridly angry, and send Alice away. I heard nurse talking the other day about her, and she declared that she always kept her word; and that when she said she would do a thing, she always did it. Only think, Madeline! all because of the bonbons: how could you do it?' Madeline could only reply by tears; and then Ruth for the first time began to see that her pride and self-conceit had made her behave, it might almost be called, cruelly. Instead of comforting Madeline, she had added everything which could increase her distress. Ruth was naturally very warm-hearted, and loved her sister most dearly; and now, as she stood by her, and saw her grief, she began to feel great

Digitized by Google

sorrow and self-reproach. Madeline was generally so full of happiness, it seemed something quite new and strange to hear her sob as if her heart would break. Ruth kissed her, and called her 'dear Madeline,' and wished that their mamma would come to them; but when she offered to go and fetch her, Madeline held her fast, and protested that she would rather not see her, she would be so very much displeased; besides, she was gone out.

'She must be in by this time,' said Ruth: 'look how black it is; the storm is coming.'

Madeline, however, did not raise her eyes; but when a distant rumbling sound was heard, she caught Ruth's hand and held it tight. 'Papa thought it would come!' she exclaimed: 'it frightens me so.'

'Think of old Roger,' said Ruth: 'it does not matter to us.'

'Yes; but I don't like it: do you think it will be very bad?'

'I don't know; it looks very black, very black indeed. There! I saw the lightning, didn't you?'

Madeline shook with terror; she had always had a great fear of thunder and lightning, and her papa and mamma had often tried to overcome it, but without success. Madeline felt what was quite true, that the dazzling flash and the loud peal were very awful; and she did not consider that she was equally under the protection of God when the sky was lowering, as when it was bright without a cloud. At that moment it was especially fearful, for her mind was not at ease. All trials become worse to us when we are not at peace with ourselves, and happy in the consciousness of striving to serve God; and as Madeline cast her eye upon the window, and saw the heavy cloud hanging before it, and the next instant watched the sharp, vivid light rush forth across the sky, and heard the crash of the thunder, she became speechless in alarm. Ruth was nearly as frightened; she had never seen such a storm before. 'I will call mamma,' she said, in a very low voice, when the peal died away. Madeline caught her dress as she was about to go; but Ruth escaped into the passage. She ran along it quickly; looked into the dining-room, and found that no one was there; knocked at the drawing-room, and received no answer; and was just going up the stairs, when she heard some one exclaim, 'How dreadful! what, both lost?'

'Not both; only the old one,' was the answer: 'the boat went to pieces at once.'

Digitized by Google

Ruth stopped, for she remembered the fisherman and his son; and, forgetting Madeline, she called loudly to the housemaid to come to her. Almost at the same instant she appeared, very pale, and with an eager manner, evidently showing that there was something of consequence to repeat. 'Only think, Miss Ruth!' she began; 'such a storm! and your poor papa and mamma both out! and that terrible upset! the boat went all to pieces.'

'Whose boat? papa and mamma were not in it, were they!' exclaimed Ruth, in her agitation.

'No, miss, not they; but the poor old man! Isn't it dreadful?'

Martha seemed quite awe-struck by the shock, and scarcely less so by the thunder, the sound of which was indeed alarming, rolling heavily along, and then bursting, as it seemed, immediately over the house in repeated claps. Martha caught hold of the balustrade, and shook from head to foot, but Ruth only remained the more still, as she generally did when she was feeling very much. 'Was it Roger's boat?' she said, at length.

Martha replied by a sigh; and then recovering herself, she began to describe the circumstances of the accident: how the storm had come on, and, in consequence, Roger and his grandson had given up their fishing expedition, and tried to reach the shore; and how the people had been watching them, until, as they were nearing the land, the lightning struck the boat and shivered it to atoms.

'But if they were so close,' said Ruth, 'they could not be drowned.'

'Ah! but 'twas the old man, Miss Ruth,' replied the servant: 'he couldn't swim, do you see; but young William did, so he got to shore; but poor old Roger 's gone, quite gone; they picked up his body, but there wasn't a bit of life left in it.'

Whilst Martha spoke, the tears gathered in Ruth's eyes. She had never before heard of the sudden death of any person whom she had actually known; and the thought that the man whom she had beheld so short a time before full of health and strength, notwithstanding his age, was now taken from the world, completely bewildered her. Ruth had never seen a person dead; she could not imagine what death could be like; and she longed for her mamma, and entreated Martha to try and find her, fancying that the merely being with her would be some protection. Martha said that Mrs Clifford was out, and begged

Digitized by Google

her not to take on, for it could do no good to the poor old man: but Ruth did not think much of this comfort; and finding that there was not any hope of her mamma's return, she took hold of Martha's hand, and begged her to go with her to the study; for it thundered so, that she did not like to go alone, and she wanted to tell Madeline about poor old Roger. Martha consented, saying, at the same time, that the place she wanted to go to was the cellar: she had heard that was the best place in a thunderstorm. Ruth seized upon any notion of what she was told might be safety; and, running back to the study, she opened the door, and called Madeline, intending that she should go with her. When she looked round, however, to her great surprise, Madeline was not there. She walked to the window and called again; and went down the passage which led to the kitchen, and inquired there; but no one knew anything of Madeline, except that the cook had heard her sobbing in the study, and the gardener fancied he had seen her running down the green walk. This every one declared was not at all likely; and, after a hasty search, the servants began to be alarmed, and were thinking of sending for Mr Clifford, when a loud knocking and a well-known voice announced their master's return.

CHAPTER XI.

THAT stormy evening was an important one to other persons besides Madeline Clifford. It was now a week since Alice had entered the forbidden rooms; and the days had passed, in appearance, exactly as before. Alice had risen at her ordinary hour—half-past six; she had dressed, and learned her lessons, and then gone in to prayers, and breakfasted with Lady Catharine, and spent the remainder of her time in reading, writing, working, and walking, just as usual. Yet the week was in reality very unlike any other week which Alice had ever spent;—much longer, and more unhappy; and all who know what it is to have something on their minds which they are afraid may be found out, will understand how this was. Alice had not only to keep her own secret, but to persuade Anne, the housemaid, to keep it too; and this was a rather difficult task. Anne was a young girl, thoughtless and selfish; and in about

Digitized by Google

a fortnight's time she was intending to leave the Manor, and go to another situation. It did not signify to her, therefore, what happened to Alice; and she took a malicious kind of pleasure in teasing her, by threatening to tell Lady Catharine. Whenever they met in the gallery, Anne would shake her head, and point to the door, and say, 'Ah, Miss Alice! you know!' and then poor Alice would entreat her not to tell, and promise to give her anything she wished, and to be kind to her all her life, if she would only declare that she would never say anything about it. Anne never did promise, really; all she said was, 'Well, we'll see; I won't tell to-day; but then, you know, I must have just a little something for being so kind.' This was a signal for Alice to go to the play-drawer, and bring out some one of her pretty things—a housewife, or a pincushion, or a little box—and offer it to Anne as a bribe; though knowing all the time that if she made Anne angry the promise would be broken, and Lady Catharine would be told all. A bought promise is never to be depended on; and even when Anne was the most kind in her manner, Alice knew that she was deceitful in her heart. She soon began to feel a great dislike to her soft words; and Marsham's rough sincerity was, in comparison, quite agreeable. Once during the week she had seen Benson for a few minutes at the garden gate, and she had then some thought of confessing to her; but Alice had sense enough to know that a person who will deceive in any one instance is not to be trusted in others; and, much as she liked Benson, she was not at all certain that her secret would be safe with her. Yet Benson was very kind; she kissed her, brought her some sugar-plums, and promised to make her a beautiful new pincushion; and when she went away, her parting words were: 'I will be sure to come and see you again, and we won't care anything about Lady Catharine.' Alice, however, did care for Lady Catharine, even with her stern features and her cold manner, for she knew that she was true, and that Benson was not; and the slightest smile from the one was really of more value to her than all the sugared words of the other, whom she could not in her heart respect. Each day was to Alice a day of anxiety. Sometimes she thought that Anne would tell; then, that by some means or other Lady Catharine would find the lost bonbon in the passage, and inquire how it came there; or else, that when the rest were returned, and Madeline was ordered not to bring any more sweet things to the Manor, she

Digitized by Google

might say something which might betray what had been done; though for her own sake, to conceal about the sashes, Alice trusted that she would not speak of the exchange. If Lady Catharine mentioned Mrs Clifford's name, Alice's colour went and came as though she were ill; if a walk into the village was proposed, she was in dread lest they should meet some one from the parsonage; and if anything was said about the two children's coming for another day's amusement, Alice did not dare express much wish to see them; she felt that she could be safe nowhere. Perpetually she wondered whether Lady Catharine had sent back the bonbons; and, if she had not, when she intended to do it; but the fact was, that what to her was of great consequence, was a mere trifle to Lady Catharine. The bonbons had been put aside, with the intention of their being returned the next time Mrs Clifford came; for having many engagements that week, Lady Catharine had not considered it worth while to write a note. But perhaps the most painful thing of all to Alice's feelings was Lady Catharine's increasing kindness. She was growing more accustomed to a child's habits; and, being naturally considerate, she was learning how to give Alice pleasure in many little ways which at first she would not have thought of. Alice really was improving; she answered her Scripture questions much more readily; she wrote her exercises more carefully; and she was beginning to work to Marsham's satisfaction. The pleasure which this gave to Lady Catharine could only be understood by persons who observed the difference between her present manner and what it had been before, ever since her husband's death. There was now some one again to love and care for; and Lady Catharine's affection for Alice was becoming the great charm of her life. Even the villagers noticed the change; and declared that my lady was quite another creature since she had taken little Miss Lennox to go about with her. She seemed to care for all children now, and really would pat them, and speak to them, instead of scolding them as she used to do; and the first-class girls in the school actually looked forward with pleasure instead of dread to the fortnight's examination; for Lady Catharine made allowances for them when they were wrong, and praised them when they were right; whereas before, she had expected them to be perfect, and if they were, scarcely seemed to think they deserved to be rewarded. Alas! that children should by their own misconduct throw away the love

Digitized by Google

and the attention which God has given to be the greatest blessings of their lives!

It was the same day on which the conversation had passed between Mr Clifford and his little girls, held on the sea-shore. Alice had been more alone than usual, for Marsham was gone to see her mother, who was ill, and lived at a considerable distance from Laneton, and Lady Catharine had kept very much to her own room. She was thinking particularly of her husband; for at that same season, fifteen years before, she had been first married; the first arrival at the Manor was fresh in her memory; she recollected his affectionate words, and his anxious endeavour to make her happy, and how she had looked forward to a long life of enjoyment; and now ten years had gone by since he had been laid in his quiet grave, and she had been left a widow indeed, and desolate. Kneeling in her chamber alone, Lady Catharine recalled all the circumstances of her great loss, and the blessings which had still followed her in life; and as she repeated them one by one—the opportunities for public and private prayers, God's holy word and sacraments, His minister to be her friend, her health, and strength, and rank, and fortune—tears of thankfulness mingled with her sorrow; and when at last the name of Alice Lennox passed her lips, she prayed earnestly, most earnestly, that it might please her Heavenly Father still to preserve to her this one great blessing, which had made the last few months happier than she had dared to hope her earthly life might ever be again. The prayer was ended, and Lady Catharine rose; and going to her bureau, took out a packet of letters, which she had received from her husband in the early period of their married life: they made her very melancholy, yet the satisfaction which she felt in reading them induced her to occupy herself with them much longer than she had at first intended. Something was said in one of them about a roll of old papers which contained some interesting anecdotes of Mr Hyde's family. Lady Catharine well remembered having been engaged at the time when she received this letter, so that she could not look for the papers; and afterwards various circumstances prevented her from thinking much about them: now a strong desire seized her to find them; and taking the keys belonging to her husband's rooms, she determined upon searching for them; for a long time, however, she looked in vain; neither in the desk, nor the writing tables, neither in the drawers, nor the cabinets, were any such

Digitized by Google

papers to be seen. As a last hope, she determined upon examining the bureau in the entrance passage, though she believed it to be empty; and so, indeed, it proved; but just as Lady Catharine was moving away in disappointment, she discovered a little edge of paper between the bureau and the wall; and on trying to draw it out, she found that it was part of a large packet, which had slipped down, and could not be taken up without danger of tearing it. Lady Catharine's dislike to allowing her husband's apartments to be entered made her doubt, at first, whether she would call any one to move the cabinet; but as it was probable that this roll of paper was the very one for which she was looking, she at length summoned the men-servants, and the bureau was with some difficulty removed from its place. The papers fell to the ground; and as the butler stooped to gather them up, he picked up, also, the lost bonbon: it was put into Lady Catharine's hand, but she scarcely looked at it; the papers were all, that she, at the moment, cared for; and finding that they proved to be the same for which she had been seeking, she carried them to her room. As she placed them on the table, however, the bonbon caught her eye: she supposed that it must have been a stray one from those which she had put away; but no: she was certain the butler had given it to her with the papers—he had found it behind the bureau—and how did it come there? Alice! was it possible? could Alice really have been so disobedient, so forgetful of all the kindness which had been shown her, as to break the only command upon which Lady Catharine had strongly insisted? But the bonbons were Madeline Clifford's; Alice had said so; and Lady Catharine felt relieved, for her mind was immovably fixed to keep to her determination; and if Alice proved deceitful, to send her from the Manor. When Lady Catharine made the resolution, she had not known how hard it would be to keep it; she had cared but little for Alice, except for her mother's sake, but now the thought of parting from her was cause of the deepest sorrow; and yet she did not for an instant think of changing her mind. What she had once settled upon, she was certain, as far as any human being can be certain, to carry into effect. The papers were put away as things of no consequence; the bell was rung, and Alice was summoned to Lady Catharine's presence. The message was taken by the housemaid; and when she delivered it, she added, with a laugh —'There is something in store for you, Miss Alice, I'll be bound: my lady looks as black as thunder.'

Digitized by Google

Alice's face became deadly pale. 'O Anne!' she exclaimed, 'you have not told?'

'No, no, Miss Alice, never fear me—I 'm quite safe; but my lady has found out something, that 's certain.'

'How! she can't—it is impossible. Madeline never would tell, and no one else knows,' said Alice, feeling at the same time very distrustful.

'If she has,' continued Anne, 'you 've nothing to do but to face it out; it will be only her word against yours.'

Alice looked excessively shocked. 'How wicked! how dreadful!' she exclaimed: 'Anne, how very naughty of you to think of such a thing! and I should get Madeline into such disgrace.'

'Well, that 's as you think,' continued Anne; 'but there couldn't be much disgrace for little Miss Clifford, because she wasn't told like you, and her papa and mamma never scold her a bit; they arn't at all like my lady: but there 's the bell again: you must go.'

'And you won't tell—you are sure you won't tell; you will be a good, kind Anne,' said Alice, hesitating.

'Trust me; but if I were you I should get out of it somehow, and Miss Madeline 's so good-natured she won't care what you say.'

'Don't you really think it would signify? but it would be very wrong;' and Alice held the handle of the door, unwilling to open it.

'As to its signifying, I am sure it won't; but it 's no good staying here to think.' This Alice herself knew quite well; and, making a sudden effort, she ran out of the room. Her knock at Lady Catharine's door was not very loud, and the voice which bade her come in did not tend to make her less frightened.

Lady Catharine was seated with her head leaning upon one hand, whilst the other held the lost bonbon. She looked pale, and there was a dark colour round her eyes, and a pressure of her lips, which told that her mind was unusually disturbed. Alice stood before her without daring to speak, and Lady Catharine looked at her as if she would have discovered the truth from her countenance. There was a pause for some instants, and then Lady Catharine, without any preparation, placed the bonbon before Alice, and said, 'I have found this: tell me where?'

Alice raised her eyes, which she had fixed upon the ground

Digitized by Google

She looked first at the bonbon, then at Lady Catharine; her only hope of escape was in evasion: 'The bonbons were Madeline Clifford's,' she said, rejoicing at having avoided an actual falsehood.

'I know it,' continued Lady Catharine, in the same voice; 'my question was not to whom it belonged, but where it was found.'

'It must have dropped in the passage,' replied Alice, summoning courage to reply more boldly.

'And in what passage? Where were you playing?'

'In the gallery, by the window-seat.'

Lady Catharine thought a little, and then went on: 'Was the door into the east room open at the time?'

'Yes—no—no—yes; I can't remember,' stammered Alice, for she could not perceive at the instant whether it would be better for her to tell the truth or not.

'You can't remember? then you have no idea how this bonbon was lost under the large bureau?'

Alice quailed under Lady Catharine's eye, but a second time she evaded the question: 'Madeline was playing with them,' she said.

'And Madeline went into the passage,' continued Lady Catharine, in a softened tone; 'was it so, Alice? do not be afraid to tell me.'

But Alice was afraid. Even after her first falsehood, in saying that the bonbons were Madeline's, she scrupled to be guilty of a second. Lady Catharine rose, and drawing up her stately figure to its full height, she folded her hands, and waited patiently for an answer. Alice's heart beat so that she could hear it; she tried to say something, but it was impossible; till at length, bursting into tears, she exclaimed, 'Indeed, I cannot tell.'

Lady Catharine made no attempt to stop her tears, but again repeated the question: 'Was it so?' Still Alice only cried; and Lady Catharine, convinced by her distress of the truth of her suspicions, said, in a faint, yet bitter voice, 'Alice, it was my only command, and you have disobeyed it.'

'No, no!' exclaimed Alice, urged at length by fear to do what under different circumstances she would have shrunk from, 'it was not me—Madeline had them.'

'Are you sure—quite sure?—remember, Alice, there is nothing so dreadful as falsehood!' But Alice had committed the

Digitized by Google

sin, and there was now but little difficulty in persisting in it. With a firmer voice than before she repeated her assertion, adding, that she hoped Lady Catharine would not be angry with Madeline. Lady Catharine, however, was very distrustful; it did not seem natural that Alice should feel so much, if she had done nothing wrong, and she determined to sift the matter to the bottom. She placed herself at her writing-desk, and wrote a few lines to Mr Clifford, begging him to come to her instantly; and then saying, 'The truth must be discovered by some means, Alice,' she went out of the room; the door was locked on the outside, and Alice was left to her own thoughts. And they were far from agreeable. The first step in sin, the indulgence of an idle wish, had led her into the untruth, which she had told on the previous week, and now it was dragging her on in many others: she had wilfully departed from the safe path—who could tell where she might now be led? She cried bitterly, and from the bottom of her heart wished that she had never been tempted to do wrong. But Alice's sorrow was not the true Christian sorrow, which God accepts for the sake of Jesus Christ. It did not lead her to confess her faults, and submit without murmuring to whatever punishment might be inflicted upon her—rather, it made her the more determined to conceal what she had done, at any risk. She felt certain that no one would be very angry with Madeline, and she did not know what might be the consequences to herself. This at least was the way in which she argued; for, being really good-natured, she would not willingly have done anything which could have brought another person into difficulty.

The minutes seemed long before any one came to interrupt her; and the clouds, which were gathering quickly over the sky, made the hour appear later than it really was. Alice began to be afraid lest Lady Catharine intended to lock her up for the night. Presently she heard footsteps along the passage—slow, heavy ones—not at all like Lady Catharine's; then there were voices, but she could not discover what was said; and immediately afterwards the key turned in the door, and Lady Catharine entered, followed by Mr Clifford. Alice thought she must have sunk upon the floor; of all persons, the one whom she most dreaded to see, the one in whose presence she felt the greatest awe, was Mr Clifford.

'We are come to hear your story again, Alice,' said Lady

Digitized by Google

Catharine, advancing towards her; 'repeat to Mr Clifford what you have said to me.' Alice could remember nothing; her head seemed turning round, and her mind was confused. 'Perhaps,' said Mr Clifford, kindly, yet very gravely, 'Lady Catharine will allow me to ask one or two questions myself. You know, Alice, I must be anxious and sorry, when I think that Madeline has been doing wrong.' Alice was comforted by Mr Clifford's manner, for he did not appear to suspect her of untruth. 'Was it the last time Madeline was here that she brought the bonbons?' continued Mr Clifford.

Alice answered, 'Yes.'

'And you had never seen them before?'

'No, never.' Alice answered at random, for she had no time for thought.

'And you did not take any yourself? are you not fond of them?'

'Yes—a little—sometimes; I don't much care.'

'But what was the reason of your not taking them?'

'I don't know: Lady Catharine does not like me to have them.'

As Alice said this, a smile of pleasure stole over Lady Catharine's face, but Mr Clifford looked graver than before: 'And as Madeline was playing with the bonbons, one rolled into the passage, and she went in to fetch it—was that it?' Alice made no answer. 'Or,' continued Mr Clifford, in a tone so very quiet, and yet so severe, that Alice trembled, 'was it that Madeline and you had made an agreement to exchange the bonbons for some ribbons? that the bonbons were yours, not hers? that you took them, though you knew Lady Catharine would be displeased? that it was you who were playing with them, and that it was you who went after them?' There was a dead silence. The muscles in Lady Catharine's throat were working with agitation, and she passed her hand across her eyes to brush away a tear. Mr Clifford's countenance was perfectly still, but his eyes were fixed upon Alice. 'Your ladyship must be the judge,' he said at length, turning to Lady Catharine; 'I have already heard some of this story before from Madeline: her version is very different from Alice's, and I have never yet discovered her in telling an untruth.'

'Madeline is cross—she is unkind—very unkind,' exclaimed Alice; 'I never do such things to her.'

'Hush! Alice,' and Lady Catharine held up her finger to en-

Digitized by Google

force her words, 'we will have no complaints. One of you is wrong, worse than wrong—wicked. God knows, though we do not.'

'I will bring Madeline here, if you wish it,' said Mr Clifford, perceiving that Lady Catharine was not inclined to believe in Alice's guilt; 'perhaps when they are together it will be easier to discover the true state of the case.'

'I would rather'—Lady Catharine paused, doubting whether Mr Clifford would like the offer. 'I should judge, I think, better—if you did not care—if I were to go to her.'

Mr Clifford looked rather surprised, but Lady Catharine's evident distress was not to be reasoned against. It was no light matter to her, if Alice should prove guilty. 'I am afraid the storm will be increasing,' said Mr Clifford; but Lady Catharine was in no mood to think of or care for storms. She would not delay—she would not even hear of the carriage being ordered—but after one look at Alice of sorrow, yet of deep affection, she went to prepare for her walk to the Parsonage, and in a few minutes Alice was again left alone. This time she was free. No doors were locked; she might wander wherever she chose; but where could she go, and what could she do? who could help her in her difficulty? who could recall her sinful words? That which has been done cannot be undone: we may repent, and God may forgive, but when we have once committed an evil deed, or spoken an evil word, or thought an evil thought, it must remain recorded in the awful book of remembrance, to be a witness against us on the day when we stand before the judgment-seat of the Almighty to answer for our lives upon earth. Alice Lennox could never again be as she had been before. She had 'let her mouth speak wickedness, and with her tongue she had set forth deceit;' and now, to save herself from punishment, she was about to 'sit and speak' against her friend—to slander her playfellow and companion. When Alice wished for the bonbons, how little did she imagine into what guilt she should be led! But she was not then sensible of her grievous fault; she considered only the chance of escape from punishment; for her heart had become more hardened, and even Lady Catharine's look of sadness had made no impression upon her. Still less was she inclined to have compassion upon Madeline, or to consider the distress it would occasion her to have her word doubted; it was not a moment for thinking upon any one but herself. She hid her

Digitized by Google

face against the wall, whilst a crowd of confused thoughts passed through her mind. Presently, there was a slight noise at the door, and some one touched the handle, but Alice did not look up; it was then softly turned, and two persons stole very gently into the room. 'This is my lady's own room,' said the one who came in first.

'Ah! very beautiful! to be sure—but, dear me!' and at Benson's voice, Alice started up, and almost screamed.

'Miss Alice! La! but I thought you were out with my lady,' exclaimed Anne; 'and the storm, did you ever hear anything like it? she won't be back for this hour, that's certain.'

The presence of Benson, and the assurance of Lady Catharine's absence, gave a little comfort to Alice's spirit; but it was soon gone. She had not time to ask how Benson came there, or why she had ventured into the house, before Anne poured forth a torrent of questions: 'what had been the matter? why was she left alone? what had she been crying for? had my lady been very angry? did she know about'—— and Anne shook her head, and pointed to the passage. Alice had no heart to answer: she felt as if Anne had led her into mischief by suggesting the second falsehood which she had told, and she only longed for her to be gone. But Anne was not inclined to go, and neither was Benson. They stood by her, and petted her, and said a great many foolish and wrong things about Lady Catharine's cruelty and whims, till at length Alice began to think that perhaps after all she had been treated hardly, and then, in her turn, she recounted all that had taken place.

'Well, to be sure!' exclaimed Benson, when she had finished; ''twas fortunate enough that I chanced to come this evening. To think of your being left all alone, and treated so bad; and I never should have found out a word about it, if it hadn't been for Marsham's mother being ill, and she away, and cook gone out for an hour; and so, you see, we had the coast clear all to ourselves, and I thought if I could just keep out of my lady's sight, I might manage to see you, my pretty dear, and the house too. But 'tis a real blessing that my lady's gone, and the thunder will be positive to hold her where she is. So, now cheer up, Miss Alice, and tell us what we can do.'

'I can tell what's to be done,' exclaimed Anne; 'there is no one knows better than me how to get out of a harl. If I just keep the same story as Miss Alice, there'll be two to one; and who's to go against us then?'

Digitized by Google

Alice could not feel thankful: she felt her selfishness, yet she could not bring herself to put a stop at once to such a plan. 'Ah! yes, that's just right, anything to serve a friend,' said Benson; 'nobody knows, and nobody will tell, and 'twill all do very well; though I can't, for the life of me, think why you should care for the notion of being sent to school. If 'twasn't just for me, you'd be buried alive like here.'

'It's not about school altogether,' said Alice, 'but Lady Catharine looks so'——

'Well, so she does! she looks as if she could cut one's head off; not a bit like your poor dear mamma, she was an angel; but there, we won't talk of her,' continued Benson, seeing that Alice's eyes were dimmed with tears. Alice, however, was not crying for the reason which Benson imagined; it was not so much the remembrance of Lady Catharine's harshness, or her mamma's affection, which had touched her heart, as the thought of her own wickedness, and the difference between her past conduct and the advice which had frequently been given her. She felt, in truth, that if her mamma could know all she had been doing, her sorrow would be very great; and the conviction crossed her mind that none could enter the state of happiness, in which she believed her mamma now to be, except those who lived a life of holiness, and it was the last prayer she had heard from her mother's lips, that God would grant her the unspeakable blessing of meeting her child again, when the trial of her life should be over. Benson was sorry that she had said anything to make Alice more unhappy, and now again began to cheer her by assuring her that Anne would be her friend, and that two to one against Miss Madeline would be sure to beat. Anne also repeated the same thing, but she was tired of trying to give comfort; and as the time was passing on, she begged Benson to go with her over the other rooms, that she might see them before Lady Catharine came back. Benson consented, and was leaving the room, when a sudden fancy struck Anne, and she stopped: 'To be sure!' she exclaimed; 'I never thought of it; there couldn't be a better opportunity; just the very thing. I say, Miss Alice, my dear, where does Marsham keep the key? you know what I mean:' and Anne nodded and winked.

'I don't know. What key do you mean? Marsham has a great many,' said Alice.

'Ay, but the key of the rooms: they are shut up to-day:

Digitized by Google

they always are when Marsham isn't here, and I should so like cousin Benson to see them.

'That's a good notion,' exclaimed Benson;' 'it would just pass away the time, and keep me from thinking about the thunder. What a storm there is! I declare if it doesn't turn my heart upside down.'

'But, Anne, indeed you must not. Lady Catharine will be excessively angry,' said Alice. Anne laughed.

'As for that, she's had plenty of causes to be angry before now. What a goose, to think I should have lived so long in the house, and up early and late, and never done more than peep in at that door when half the times it was open: no, no, if my lady wants to keep it all quiet, she had better lock it up, and keep the key herself. So now tell me, Miss Alice, dear, where's the key? I'll be bound you know.'

Alice again protested, and Anne looked impatient and threatening; at that instant a vivid flash of lightning illuminated the room, followed instantly by a roll of thunder.

'It's quite dangerous, I declare,' exclaimed Benson, turning pale; 'they say it's always worse when the thunder comes so soon.'

'It's setting in this way,' said Anne; 'if we were wise, and went to the other side, there wouldn't be a bit of fear. Come, Miss Alice, come, it won't do to stop here.'

'But Lady Catharine'—began Alice.

'Nonsense! Lady Catharine! What should I care for her? I'm going away.'

'But I can't, indeed I can't,' continued Alice.

'Then I can't, indeed I can't,' repeated Anne, contemptuously. 'If you can't for me, I can't for you, and what's to be done then?'

Here Benson stepped forward, and began to entreat in more gentle terms. 'She was sure her own dear Alice would be good-natured; it was such a little thing, and they had done so much for her, and Anne would be certain to keep her own counsel, and never to tell tales upon her.'

'Ah, yes!' said Anne, angrily; 'and if I don't keep my own counsel now, I know who 'll come badly off.'

'But what shall I do? I can't be left—I can't stay here,' replied Alice, as she gazed at the lowering sky, and hid her face when the lightning broke through the gloom.

'No, that you can't,' said Anne; 'at least if you do, I 'm

Digitized by Google

sure I shall not; 'tis a storm not fit for a dog to look at, and I'm going.' She moved to the door, but no one followed.

'Come, there's a dear,' said Benson, coaxingly, taking Alice's hand. 'My lady will be back when it leaves off, and I never shall have such an opportunity again. You know Anne says we shall be quite safe there—and what's the harm of going into a room? It's only my lady's whim.'

'But you won't leave me,' cried Alice, imploringly.

'No, certainly not; you come too—the more the merrier,' said Anne; who, notwithstanding her boasting, had always had a superstitious dread of the shut-up rooms. 'We can be out the moment it begins to clear,' she continued; 'my lady need never know a bit about it; and when she comes home, I'll say anything you like, and get you out of your scrape, and then you'll be quite happy.'

'Besides,' persisted Benson, 'it isn't anything for you; you've been in once, so the mischief's done.'

Anne's sharp eye saw signs of yielding, for Alice gazed wistfully at the window; but the storm still raged violently. To be left alone with the lightning and the thunder—and alone with an evil conscience, seemed more terrible than any other punishment.

'The key is in Marsham's room, isn't it?' said Anne. Alice nodded an assent. 'With the large bunch?'

'No.' Alice was so nervous that she could scarcely speak the word.

'Well! where? where?—make haste,' said Anne.

'In the—in the—the left-hand drawer of the large chest.'

Anne scarcely waited for the last word before she was gone to fetch it; and a minute afterwards she returned, holding it triumphantly in her hand. 'Come along, come; we've no time to lose.' She led the way, and Benson and Alice followed.

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN Madeline Clifford was left by her sister in the study, her inclination was to go after her. She was thoroughly frightened by the storm, and she had no power to reason; and only the recollection of Mr Clifford's commands induced her to

Digitized by Google

remain for an instant in the room alone. Madeline, however, had never been suffered to disobey in the least particular; and she had been made so unhappy by her late fault, that the dread of her father's displeasure was at first greater even than her terror at the thunder and lightning. She stood at the door, and listened to Ruth's footsteps, and caught a few words of the conversation between her and Martha; till at last, just as the loudest clap of all burst over head, she heard Martha's speech about the cellar, and in sudden alarm, forgetful of all her former anxiety to obey her papa's wishes, she ran towards it. The door opened not far from the study; and before Ruth entered the room to tell of the terrible accident which had befallen old Roger, Madeline was safe at the bottom of the cellar stairs, hiding herself among some wood and coals which were kept in a dark hole at the entrance.

It was no wonder that Ruth was puzzled to know what was become of her. Few persons would have thought of looking for her in such a place; and there had been scarcely time to determine what was to be done, when Mr Clifford appeared, and Lady Catharine Hyde with him. The servants eagerly told their story, and Ruth stood by without speaking; but Mr Clifford was not a person easily to be frightened; he had no doubt that Madeline would soon be found, but he was distressed at her attempting to conceal herself. It seemed to show that she was conscious of greater guilt than she had confessed; and his heart sank as he thought that, after all, Alice might have spoken the truth, and his own child, whom he had entirely trusted, might have deceived him. 'Leave it to me,' he replied, calmly, when he had heard all that was to be said; 'no one need be alarmed: Madeline is far too great a coward to venture out of doors; and if I call her, she will come directly.'

Lady Catharine seated herself in the arm-chair with a countenance of determined patience, and Mr Clifford began his search. For a little while it was unsuccessful, and he began to be slightly uneasy; but the truth was soon guessed, when he observed that the door leading down the cellar stairs was open. He gently called Madeline; but receiving no answer, he went down a few steps, and again repeated her name. A timid voice answered, 'Papa!' and Madeline, with a very white face, but a dress covered with coal-dust, appeared. 'It was the thunder, papa,' she said, before Mr Clifford attempted to make any inquiries.

Digitized by Google

'I hope it was, Madeline,' was the reply;' 'but I shall know more about this presently; Lady Catharine Hyde is here.'

'Must I see her?' and Madeline looked very much dismayed; 'my frock is so dirty.'

'It must not be changed, though; she is waiting to speak to you.'

Madeline could do nothing but obey; and Mr Clifford opened the study door, and ushered her into the awful presence of Lady Catharine Hyde. Madeline glanced around for Ruth as the only hope of comfort; but her father had signed to her to leave the room, and poor Ruth, feeling certain that something dreadful was going to happen, ran off to watch from the drawing-room window for her mamma's return, which, as the storm was rather going off, would not, she thought, be long delayed.

Lady Catharine Hyde had by nature a great dislike to all mysteries, and never could consent to gain her object by any but the most direct means. She had no idea of questioning Madeline so as to find out the truth by degrees; but, acting by her as she had done by Alice, she drew forth the bonbon from her reticule, and, holding it up, said, 'This is yours; I am come to return it to you.'

'No, it is not; it was—it is not mine now,' stammered Madeline: and the crimson colour spread itself over her face and neck.

'No equivocation, Madeline,' said Lady Catharine, in a reproachful tone, whilst Mr Clifford's countenance showed his distress; 'is it yours, or is it not?'

'It is not mine,' replied Madeline, growing bolder; 'I gave it to Alice.'

Lady Catharine coughed drily. 'You do not know, then, where it was lost?'

'Speak, Madeline!' said Mr Clifford; 'tell at once all that you can.'

'I have told you, papa,' replied Madeline, sobbing; for she dreaded to be obliged to repeat the story again.

'That will not do; I must hear from your own lips,' continued Lady Catharine. 'I am afraid, very much afraid, that you have been a most wicked child.'

'I am very sorry,' began Madeline, in a broken voice; but her papa interrupted her.

'True sorrow, Madeline, is shown in something more than

Digitized by Google

words. If you have spoke an untruth, and have laid blame on Alice which should have been yours, the least you can do is to own it.'

'Me! me, papa!' exclaimed Madeline, raising her head in amazement.

'Yes, you!' continued Lady Catharine: 'you were aware, as well as Alice, of my orders against any person's going into the east rooms at the Manor; and you chose to disobey; and then, when you had disobeyed, you tried to make your papa believe that it was Alice, and pretended to confess, as if you were unhappy about it. O Madeline! I could not have supposed a little girl would have been so wicked.' Madeline looked at her papa, but said nothing. She was confounded by the accusation, and could not comprehend who had ventured to make it; and she expected him to undertake her defence. Having acknowledged the truth, she imagined, as a matter of course, that he would uphold her. 'I was right, you see,' said Lady Catharine, turning to Mr Clifford. 'When the facts are put before her, she has no excuse to make. I am grieved, very grieved for you.'

'But,' exclaimed Madeline, recovering from her first surprise, and speaking in great agitation, 'it was not me! it was Alice: I said so; papa knows it, and Ruth too; I told them both. Alice went in, and I waited for her till mamma called: and the bonbons were not mine; I gave them all to Alice for the green and white sashes.'

Lady Catharine coughed again. 'I don't see how the truth is to be determined,' she said. 'It is only one child's word against another's; and we are both naturally inclined to believe as we wish.'

'I own I am very much inclined in this case,' said Mr Clifford, mildly. 'Madeline, you have never, that I know, told me a falsehood before; but your story is very different from Alice's. She says that the bonbons were yours, and that you lost this one, and went in after it.'

'Alice is—— I don't love Alice, she tells lies!' exclaimed Madeline, in extreme indignation: 'I don't want ever to play with her again.'

'Hush! hush!' said her papa, putting his hand upon her mouth: 'whatever Alice may have done, you have been very naughty yourself. The giving the bonbons and taking the sashes, was what you knew your mamma and Lady Catharine

Digitized by Google

would disapprove; and that was the beginning of all this mischief.'

'Yes,' observed Lady Catharine; 'and a little girl who could do that, could do anything.'

'It was a mutual fault,' quietly observed Mr Clifford; 'they were both equally to blame.'

Lady Catharine was vexed. 'I see, Mr Clifford,' she said, rising proudly from her seat, 'that your affection is too great for your judgment: perhaps I had better return, and leave you to consider the matter more at your leisure. For myself, I can put but little faith in the word of a child who has evidently shown herself confused and uncertain in all that she has said, and who was so alarmed at my appearance that she ran away to hide herself.'

'No, it was not to hide! it was the thunder! I did not care a bit about you; I only cared for the thunder!' exclaimed Madeline, vehemently; and, in her desire to prove her innocence, forgetting the awe which she had hitherto felt.

'Possibly,' said Lady Catharine, in a tone which showed that she did not believe it. 'But what is to be done, Mr Clifford?—what would you advise? Shall I return, and leave you to examine your little girl alone, till you are as convinced as I am of the true state of the case?'

'Your ladyship will pardon me, I hope,' replied Mr Clifford; 'I do not believe that any examination is likely to convince me; and there is one thing you have forgotten—Madeline says that she gave the bonbons in exchange for some sashes. These sashes she has now; she can bring them to you if you like it. So far there is evidence that her word is true.'

'Yes, very probably it may be; but that does not alter the case. I care nothing about the bonbons, they are not worth thinking of; all that I wish to know is, who went into the east rooms, and of that there is not the shadow of doubt.' Lady Catharine spoke positively, as persons very often do when, without being aware of it, they begin to waver. 'My mind is relieved,' she continued, taking up her reticule; 'I shall return much easier than I came; the storm I think will soon be over, and Alice will be impatient.'

Mr Clifford felt very much annoyed; he had never before seen so full an evidence of the strength of Lady Catharine's prejudices. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'we cannot part in this way. Your ladyship's mind may be relieved, but mine is not; for my

Digitized by Google

own happiness, and for the sake of my child, I must beg to go back with you to the Manor, and take Madeline with me; when we have examined her with Alice, we shall be far better able to judge what is the truth. If you will allow me I will speak a few words to Mrs Clifford, who, I think, must be returned, and then I shall be ready to attend you.'

Mr Clifford's manner was so decided, that even Lady Catharine was a little struck by it. He left the room, and Madeline remained alone with her. No word was spoken. Madeline pulled the strings of her bonnet, and Lady Catharine patted her umbrella on the floor, and coughed several times. The five minutes were the longest that Madeline had ever spent—it seemed as if they never would end; but they did end at last. Mr Clifford returned, and Madeline was sent up-stairs to put on a clean frock. In the passage she met her mamma and Ruth. Both looked at her very sadly, and Madeline saw that Ruth had been crying; and then her heart smote her for all the trouble and anxiety she had caused. In her indignation at being falsely accused she had forgotten that any blame could attach to her for her own faults. Ruth turned away; but Mrs Clifford went with her to her room, took out her dress, and fastened it, but still did not speak; and this silence touched Madeline's heart more than any words. If her mamma, who was always so gentle, and ready to excuse, and unwilling to believe that any one had done wrong, was thus altered in her manner, she was sure that the pain she had occasioned must be very great. Lady Catharine was standing by the door when Madeline re-entered the study, and Mr Clifford was by her side, his hat in his hand. Both were impatient to go, and the quarter of a mile between the Parsonage and the Manor was quickly passed. The storm was dying away. Dark masses of the thunder-clouds were heaped together, leaving glimpses of the blue sky, across which there flitted occasionally a light, fleecy, golden vapour, tinged by the brightness of the setting sun. Still, however, some remains of its fury were heard, in the heavy rumbling sound which murmured in the distance—and at any other time Madeline might have felt timid at venturing out of the house until it had entirely subsided, but all her thoughts were now engaged in anger against Alice, and dread of Lady Catharine. The house seemed even more than usually silent when they entered it; and Lady Catharine, wishing to speak a few words with Alice alone, begged Mr Clifford

Digitized by Google

to stay in the drawing-room with Madeline, whilst she went up-stairs. Her footsteps were scarcely heard as she passed along the open gallery, treading the soft velvet carpet with which it was covered; and with some curiosity to know how Alice had borne her absence, she noiselessly opened the door of her own apartment—but it was empty. Lady Catharine was surprised, yet she did not suspect anything amiss, and remembering that she had given no orders to Alice, she imagined that she would be found in the school-room. Again she was mistaken; there were the lesson-books, open on the table, and a work-box, and writing-desk, and a story-book, which Alice had been reading just before Lady Catharine sent for her, but she herself was not there. Lady Catharine called, 'Alice,' but her voice sounded hollow and lonely in the stillness of the house. A foreboding of evil came over her, she could scarcely tell why. There was nothing really unnatural in Alice's being away; yet Lady Catharine again repeated her name hastily, looking round at the same time to see if she were near. She went into the passage, and stood by the window with the raised steps, the same at which Alice had played, and began to think where it was most probable to find her. Marsham's absence did not occur to her, and she supposed that Alice might be with her. Nothing was easier to ring the bell and inquire. But no, that could not be; Marsham was gone; so she directly afterwards remembered. Yet she certainly thought that she had seen the entrance to the east rooms unclosed, and that never was the case unless Marsham was at home. Lady Catharine's foreboding of something wrong became painfully strong; she moved a few steps forward; the door was a-jar, the key was in the lock, and as she fixed her eye upon it, a miserable distrust of Alice crossed her mind. With a stealthy step she entered the passage, listened, and heard nothing. She walked on, but the desolate chambers looked lonely and deserted, even as they had ever been since the death of Mr Hyde. Yet, as Lady Catharine paused before the desk, on which lay an unfinished letter, the last her husband had commenced, and gave way for an instant to the affectionate regrets which the sight of all things connected with him never failed to produce, she heard, or fancied she heard, a muttering of voices in the adjoining apartment. A moment's attention convinced her that her suspicions were correct. Some one was there, certainly; and Lady Catharine became motionless with indignation. It was her husband's study, a place

Digitized by Google

which, of all others, she had wished to guard as sacred. Yet it was plain, from the sounds, that not only had some persons intruded into it, but that they were actually employed in opening the drawers, and examining the contents. Lady Catharine recognised a careless, vulgar laugh. It was Anne's; and she breathed more freely, hoping that Alice might not be there. But the hope soon vanished. 'Pray, take care,' she heard in the well-known voice of the child she loved so well; 'Benson, do make Anne take care, indeed she will let it down.' Lady Catharine stood riveted to the spot. There was, seemingly, a little contention as to who should gain possession of some disputed article. Quick, sharp words were heard, and a scuffling of footsteps; and directly afterwards, a loud exclamation escaped from all, and with a crash the ornament, or whatever it might be, fell to the ground. Lady Catharine advanced to the doorway. Alice, Benson, and Anne, were on their knees, gathering up the fragments of a small, but rare and beautiful, china vase—a vase which Lady Catharine had received as a present from Mr Hyde, and which had been put aside as too precious to be seen by common eyes. Alice was with her back to the door, and Benson and Anne were too much alarmed at the accident to notice anything but the broken china. 'Here's a pretty mess; what shall we do now?' exclaimed Benson, as she looked at the jagged pieces, and saw that there was no possibility of repairing the mischief.

'You just go back to my lady's room, and keep her quiet, Miss Alice,' said Anne, hurriedly.

Alice rose, and remained standing in the middle of the room. She did not attempt to go, for she was overcome with alarm. There was a moment's silence, whilst Benson and Anne searched carefully for the smaller fragments, and then a stern calm voice said, 'Alice!' Alice started and screamed. Her eye glanced quickly round, and as it caught the tall dark figure of Lady Catharine, she fell back into a chair almost fainting. Benson and Anne rushed to the door, but there were no means of escape. Lady Catharine gazed on them with a countenance and manner, before which even a man's spirit might have sunk. 'You will leave my house,' was all she said; and Benson and her companion prepared mechanically to obey. Alice, every limb trembling with agitation, waited for the coming sentence; but it was not given. For a few moments Lady Catharine stood, with a fixed, upbraiding eye; and when Alice moved her

Digitized by Google

lips, and raised her hand, as if begging for pardon, she said, with a voice of perfect composure, 'Alice, I need no words,' and led her from the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

MADELINE CLIFFORD returned to her home on that evening with very different feelings from those which she had experienced on leaving it: yet few would have envied her reflections. Lady Catharine had repaired to the drawing-room after receiving from Alice a full confession of her guilt, and had openly acknowledged Madeline's innocence. She gave scarcely any explanations beyond the fact that Alice had owned her falsehood; her agitation would not permit it; but she allowed that she had been mistaken, and with the meekness of a burdened heart she entreated Mr Clifford to forgive her for having done injustice to his child, in suspecting her. Both Madeline and her papa were surprised, but it was not then the time to ask for information. Lady Catharine was evidently longing to be alone; and Mr Clifford, without venturing to express the sympathy he really felt, took his leave. Madeline walked by her father's side, silent and sorrowful: she felt relieved that the accusation had been proved to be untrue, and her anger against Alice was greatly lessened in consequence; but how much was there still to grieve over! She had given her parents reason to distrust her; she had deceived and equivocated; and but for her Alice might never have been brought into such sad disgrace. Madeline was unhappy, yet she could never know all the pain she had caused.

Lady Catharine sat in her lonely room, and her thoughts turned sadly to the future. The voice that had cheered, the smile that had delighted her, could now awaken no feelings but those of regret. Alice had proved false, and her presence could only be painful. Silence and solitude must be her punishment now; and when the necessary arrangements could be made, she must be removed to another and a stricter care. Such was Lady Catharine's determination; and Alice, though she had not been told, had little doubt that it would be so. The few attempts which she had made to excuse herself during the short time

Digitized by Google

which Lady Catharine remained with her had been instantly silenced; her tears and prayers had been unheeded; and when the door of her chamber was closed and locked, Alice, in despair, threw herself on her bed, and sobbed hysterically. The evening was rapidly closing in; the sun had set, and the bright lights which had tinged the clouds were fast fading away. But Alice was too miserable to observe anything; and it was not until the dusk had spread itself over the earth, and a few faint stars twinkled through the cloudy sky that she began to think of weariness, or conjecture whether she should see any one again that night.

Two long hours passed by, still Alice was alone; and this was no common suffering. Imprisonment was added to solitude: and imprisonment must in any case be a great trial. Yet there have been persons who have borne all the desolateness and privations of a dungeon itself with peace, and even joy. We are told that Paul and Silas, who were amongst the first of those who were persecuted for their Saviour's sake, being 'thrust into the inner prison,' and having 'their feet fast in the stocks; nevertheless, at midnight, 'prayed, and sang praises unto God.' The prison was not like a prison to them; it shut them out from the sight of their fellow-men, but it could not shut them out from God; and to be with Him, to know that He was watching over them, and ordering every event for good, was a comfort which could make any affliction to be endured with thankfulness.

God is, in truth, equally near to us all; but when we are conscious of having broken His laws, and sinned against Him, the thought of this awful fact can but add to our misery. To be alone with Him, then, is to be in the presence of our Judge, the Almighty, All Holy Lord, 'unto Whom all hearts are open, and from Whom no secrets are hid;' and until we have repented and prayed for forgiveness, for the sake of our blessed Saviour, we can but feel terror at the knowledge that He is looking upon us. Alice Lennox did not think of prayer; she was wretched, but her spirit was proud; and instead of repentance she felt anger. Lady Catharine seemed the most cruel of tyrants, her own lot the most miserable which any child could be called on to bear; and when, as the clock struck nine, Marsham appeared with a candle, and an order that Miss Lennox should go to bed, Alice undressed herself, quickly repeated her prayers, as a matter of form, and lay down to sleep without any

Digitized by Google

remembrance that God was displeased with her for her sin.

When Madeline reached home she still thought much of Alice; but Ruth, after she had heard what had passed, thought still more; for Madeline had her own troubles to occupy her mind. There was something in the manner both of her papa and mamma which showed that they were dissatisfied with her.

Mr Clifford took but little notice of what had occurred that evening, for Madeline looked pale, and complained of a bad headache; he kissed her, though with a grave face, as she bade him good-night, and said, 'You are tired and unwell, I see, Madeline, but I hope you will not hurry into bed too fast. There are many things for you to remember, and ask God's forgiveness for, even though you have not been so wicked as to tell a falsehood.'

Madeline coloured, and the tears stood in her eyes. 'Are you angry with me, dear papa?' she said.

'Anger, perhaps, is not the proper word, my dear child. I am grieved, not angry; your faults have been more against God than against me.'

'But Madeline was not so bad as Alice,' said Ruth, in a coaxing tone.

'We must not compare, my love; a little fault in a person who has been well taught is as bad as a great fault in a person who has had fewer advantages: and Madeline will not say that hers were little faults.'

Madeline burst into tears; she had not before believed that her papa thought thus seriously of her conduct. At that moment Mrs Clifford came into the room; and being afraid that staying up longer might be bad for Madeline's health, she urged her going to bed immediately. Madeline would willingly have remained to hear all that her papa had to say; but Mrs Clifford was anxious when she saw her looking so different from usual; and after another injunction not to forget the many faults which she had committed, Madeline went to her room. Ruth, however, lingered behind. She felt pleased, notwithstanding her regret that Madeline should be in disgrace. It seemed as if she had a greater claim than before to be petted; and, as she drew her stool to her mamma's work-table, she said, 'You are not angry with me, and you will let me stay?'

'We are not angry with Madeline,' replied Mrs Clifford.

Digitized by Google

'No; but you are not so—I mean—I think—it was not right in her to take those sashes.'

'Certainly it was not,' said Mr Clifford. 'I don't think you would have done it.'

Ruth's countenance brightened. 'Then you are pleased with me, papa?' but Mr Clifford did not appear pleased; he waited before replying, and then said 'It is your bed-time, Ruth; nearly, at least. Suppose, instead of reading up-stairs, you were to read to your mamma and me here; there would just be time before I begin my writing.' Ruth noticed her papa's manner, though she did not understand it: she brought her Bible, and inquired what she should read. 'It shall be my favourite chapter, if your mamma likes it also,' replied Mr Clifford; 'the thirteenth chapter of St Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians.' Ruth turned over the pages of her book, and began to read, but her thoughts were wandering. She spoke of the charity which 'suffereth long, and is kind;' which 'envieth not,' which 'vaunteth not itself,' which 'is not puffed up,' which 'thinketh no evil,' and 'rejoiceth not in iniquity;' but at that very time she was comparing herself with her sister, and feeling glad at the events which had shown how much better she could behave than Madeline. The chapter was finished, and Ruth laid down the book. Mr Clifford opened it again. 'Yes,' he said, repeating the last words; '"the greatest of these is charity." Charity, or what, Ruth? What is the other meaning of the word?'

'Love, mamma says,' replied Ruth.

'Even so—charity, or love, which makes us full of kind thoughts, and prevents us from envying other persons, or thinking much of ourselves; and which causes us to be sorry, instead of glad, when others do wrong. It would be very pleasant to have such a spirit of love or charity, don't you think it would?'

'Yes, very;' replied Ruth, in a timid voice, for she was beginning to see that her papa had some particular meaning in what he said.

'And if we find that we have not such a spirit, that we are apt to think much of ourselves, and are pleased at finding fault with our companions—that, in fact, we do vaunt or boast, and are puffed up, and rejoice instead of grieving at their iniquity or sin, we ought to be very much shocked; and should at once humbly ask God to forgive us as well as them, and to give us a better mind. Is not this so, Ruth?'

Digitized by Google

Whilst Mr Clifford spoke the colour in Ruth's cheek had been gradually rising, and, by the time he ended, her face and neck were crimson. 'You always know about me, papa,' she said, as Mr Clifford looked at her kindly, yet requiring an answer.

'I know about you, because I know what is natural to all persons, and what you especially have in your disposition—a love of exalting yourself in comparison with others—but, my darling, you must learn very differently before you can hope to act as becomes a baptized child of God.'

'I did not know that I exalted myself,' replied Ruth.

'Most likely you did not. It is not the first time I have told you of a secret fault—but, Ruth, you shall answer me one question honestly; do you think that it would please you to be told that the notion of Madeline's having behaved ill was a mistake, that she had done just as well, perhaps better, than yourself?'

'I—yes—I don't know—I should be very glad,' stammered Ruth.

'Honestly—quite honestly,' repeated Mr Clifford; 'from your heart, can you indeed say it?' Ruth was silent. 'If you cannot,' continued her papa; 'you may be certain the reason is because you like being put first, and made the most of.'

'I should like Madeline to be good too,' said Ruth.

'Yes, you would like it, if it did not interfere with yourself; but this is not the mind which God requires of us. It is not being humble like our Saviour; He was grieved, not glad, that men were sinners.'

'But He was so good,' said Ruth.

'Yes; our Lord was perfect, quite perfect; but if we wish to live with Him, we must try to be like Him. Do you know the way to make yourself like Him?'

'By praying to Him,' was the reply.

'That is the first and best way; but there are others which I should like you to remember. One is by thinking of Him.'

'But I can't, papa,' began Ruth, and then stopped.

'Yet,' said Mr Clifford, 'there was a promise made once that you should believe all that is told about our blessed Lord; and if you do not think, it is impossible you should ever believe rightly.'

'No persons can make themselves think,' persisted Ruth.

'Not so, my love; we all can, if we set about it in the proper way.'

Digitized by Google

'I don't know how, papa,' said Ruth, in rather a mournful tone.

'It is difficult, I know, but we can try to fix our attention; and if we are taught to repeat words, we can endeavour to understand what they mean: this you will own, I am sure.'

Ruth said 'Yes;' but she did not appear to comprehend at all more than before.

'You remember, I daresay,' continued Mr Clifford, 'how I have sometimes talked to you about the Lord's Prayer, and told you that if you would try to repeat it carefully, from your heart, you would in time learn to pray rightly. Now there is something else which we all say often, that would in the same manner teach us to think, if we would attend to it. What is it that we repeat in church which contains a short account of all which we ought to believe?'

'You mean the Creed, papa?'

'Yes; and though it may seem very strange, I am quite sure that if we were frequently to say it, not as a lesson, but with thoughtfulness, it would go a great way towards making us every day become better.'

'And especially humble,' said Mrs Clifford, as she looked up from her work, whilst a gentle, but rather a melancholy smile passed over her face. Ruth became very grave.

'Are you too sleepy to listen to a little story, Ruth?' said Mr Clifford; 'perhaps I may be able to tell you one which will show you how it is possible to teach ourselves to think; and if we do that, we can never be proud.' Ruth's eyes brightened at the proposal, and in a moment every feeling of fatigue was forgotten. 'It will be a story of two children,' continued Mr Clifford; 'two little girls, like you and Madeline; but they were not blessed, as you are, with a happy home, for their mother was dead, and their father was living in a foreign land, and school was the only place to which they could be sent. Now these two little girls were alike in their faces and their voices, as you may be, but they were very different in their hearts; the elder one, Mary, was very fond of her papa, and when first he went away she wished to please him, and tried to think of him; but the younger one, Julia, cared only for herself and her playthings. A long, long time went by after the father had left them, and these little girls, from not having seen him, almost forgot what he was like, and they became so accustomed to school, that it was quite natural to them to be there; it

Digitized by Google

seemed their home. Their papa was not able to write to them often, and so, by degrees, even the good one, Mary, seldom thought of him. But one day, when they were playing with their companions in the garden, they were told that a lady wished to speak to them—a friend of their papa's who was just come from India. Mary was glad, and ran into the house quickly; but Julia stayed behind, for she enjoyed a game of play much better than the idea of seeing a stranger. The lady was kind and winning in her manner, and after she had kissed Mary several times, she said, that she had been wishing to see them for many weeks, ever since she came to England, because she had made a promise that she would do so, if possible; and she was sure that they would be longing to hear everything about their papa. Poor little Mary felt quite unhappy when she heard this, being conscious that she did not care half so much about it as she ought. She did not love her papa as most children do, because she never thought about him. The lady went on talking, and constantly she said, "I am sure you must be delighted to hear of your papa; he is so good and kind, and so fond of you, and it will be such a pleasure to you to go and live with him." Mary did not know what to say, at first; but after the lady had told her some stories about her papa, she began to feel that she knew him better, and asked a few questions, which the lady was very willing to answer. At last Mary became so interested, that she did not think at all how the time was passing on; all that she cared for was, to be told something about her dear papa in India. After some time Julia came in, but she did not pay any attention to what was said, and soon went back to her play. By and by the moment came for the lady to go away, and when she wished Mary good-bye, she said, that this might probably be the last time she should ever see her, for she was going to leave England again immediately. This was really sad news for poor Mary, who had been thinking all the time how nice it would be to see her new friend. She looked very sorrowful, and the lady asked her what was the matter. Mary did not much like to own; but when the question was repeated, she said that she wanted to hear again about her papa, and she was afraid that if the lady went away she should forget it all. This was very likely, yet the lady could not help going, and there was no one besides who could talk to her in the same manner. Mary felt then how nice it was to have a papa, and she wished very much to do what would please him;

Digitized by Google

but if she had nothing to remind her of him, she knew that she should soon think just as much as ever of school, and just as little of India; so what do you think she did, Ruth?—she asked the lady to write down for her all she could remember, and leave it with her that she might read it over. This request was readily granted, and the next day a short account of her papa's life was sent her, written out plainly, and she might read it without trouble. Now, many little girls would just have looked at it once, and then put it aside; but this was not Mary's way. She used to read it over regularly till at last she knew it by heart, and the words came one after the other by rote, without any effort. Mary then tried more to attend to them, and she would sit by herself, and endeavour to fancy what India would be like, and what sort of life she should lead there. By degrees it became natural to her to think of her papa, and her home; and she grew anxious to go there, and learned to count the months which were to pass before she should be sent for. It was very different with Julia; she had not cared to hear anything about her papa, and you may imagine that she did not care to read about him. At first she looked over what the lady had written, but when she knew it by heart, she took no more interest about it; and at length the time came when they were to sail for India, and poor Julia was very wretched. All her happiness had been at school, and to go to India was going entirely amongst strangers, even though her papa was to be there to receive her. She begged to be allowed to stay behind, but this was impossible. There was no one to take charge of her, and with a very sorrowful heart she set out on her long voyage. It was a stormy and wearisome one, and many times even Mary's heart sank as she remembered her friends in England, and thought, that when the dangers of the sea were over, she should find herself in a foreign land. But one hope cheered her, and that was, the prospect of seeing her papa. Julia could find no comfort in this. Day after day she sat upon deck, with her eyes fixed in the direction in which she was told that England lay. She would scarcely eat or speak, and when Mary tried to rouse her, and talked to her of the pleasure they should both have in meeting their father, and begged her to listen again to the lady's account of his kindness and goodness, Julia only shook her head, and in a sullen voice said, that her papa was not like a father to her, for she knew nothing about him.

'It was a lovely morning when they first came in sight of land.

*

Digitized by Google

Mary stood upon the deck, watching the preparations for going on shore. She looked at the crowds of people who were assembling to welcome the arrival, wishing to discover her father amongst them; and the hope of at length really knowing him made her feel agitated, but very happy. A considerable time passed away, and, one after the other, the passengers landed. The lady who had charge of Mary and Julia begged them to remain where they were, as she knew that their papa would be likely to come on board to them. Mary's attention was then given to the boats which were putting off for the vessel; and each one, as it came near, she thought must be that which she expected. There were several disappointments; for other parties were waiting in the same way, and Mary envied them the pleasure of the greetings. But her own turn came at length. A gentleman, with a telescope in his hand, was seen looking at the great ship. Mary knew it must be her papa, for she had read the description of him till she fancied she knew every feature; and when he sprung up the side of the vessel, and folded her in his arms, and whispered a prayer that God would bless her, she felt that wherever he was, there her happiness would be. He was no stranger to her, for she had read of him, and thought of him; and even that foreign land became to her from that moment a home.'

'But about Julia, papa,' interrupted Ruth.

'Ah! that is the sad part of the story,' replied Mr Clifford. 'Julia's manner was not like Mary's; she had some curiosity to see her papa, but that was all; he was little more than a stranger to her; she had no love to give to him. She received him coldly, with a melancholy smile, and her eyes filled with tears. She scarcely listened to what he said, and took but a slight interest in all the new things about her. From this beginning there followed much sorrow for all. Julia felt that Mary was more pleasing to her papa than she was, and therefore that it was probable he would love her the best; and this made her jealous of the sister who before had been so dear to her. Jealousy caused unkind words, and they brought vexation and shame. Julia believed that her father and sister would be happier without her; and, notwithstanding their endeavours to make her comfortable, nothing could overcome the wretchedness she felt in thinking that she was not a favourite. When I last heard of her, she had returned to England to live by herself; but with her temper so soured, that there was little prospect of

Digitized by Google

her being really happy. And there, Ruth, is an end of my story. I wonder whether you are much the wiser for it.'

'I liked it,' said Ruth.

'But can you find out why I told it you?'

'Was it because Mary read over the paper, and learned to think, papa?'

'Yes. Mary's reading over the account of her father, is, in a certain way, like our repeating the Creed; because you know, Ruth, the Bible tells us that we are all strangers upon earth, and that our home is in heaven; and the Creed reminds us of the great God, and our blessed Saviour, and the Holy Spirit, with whom we hope one day to live in that home. We will talk more about it to-morrow, when Madeline is with us; but one thing I must ask you before you go: how is it that repeating the Creed properly would help to make you humble?' Ruth did not know what to answer. 'Whom do you speak of in it?' continued Mr Clifford.

'Of God,' replied Ruth, reverently.

'Yes, of God, "the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth;" the Maker of the dazzling sun, and the moon, and the planets, and the millions of worlds which shine above us in the darkness of night. The Maker of the trees also, and the fields, and the flowers; the Maker of everything that moves—all the little insects, and the birds, and the fishes of the sea, and the cattle which are in the fields, and the fierce beasts which roam about in distant lands. Do you not think, Ruth, that such a Being, who is perfectly holy, and knows every thought and action of our lives, must be glorious beyond what we can imagine?'

Ruth murmured 'Yes.'

'And when that Almighty Lord looks into our hearts, and sees all that passes there, what must He think of us?'

'That we are very wicked,' said Ruth.

'But if, instead of believing ourselves to be wicked, we fancy that we are good, and set ourselves up; do you suppose God is pleased with us then?' Ruth coloured, and made no reply. 'And still more,' continued Mr Clifford, 'if that great God came down from heaven, and humbled Himself to die because of our sins, how must we appear to Him, when we pride ourselves upon anything we do?' There was a short pause; and Ruth's countenance showed what was passing within. 'These are some of the truths which are taught us every time we repeat

Digitized by Google

the Creed,' continued Mr Clifford. 'I am sure I was right in saying, that thinking of them would help to make us humble. There is a great deal more which I shall like to talk to you about to-morrow, when Madeline is with us.'

'The Creed will not be so much of a lesson for the future, Ruth, will it?' said her mamma, kindly.

'I only thought it like a lesson in the catechism,' replied Ruth.

'It can never really be one,' said Mr Clifford. 'Certainly, it has the most solemn sound, when we all join in repeating it in church; but it cannot be a common thing, because it has come down to us from the time of the apostles, and tells us of such awful subjects. It is sacred, like a prayer.' Ruth could not help remembering how frequently she had said it, both in church and at home, as a mere set of words, almost without a meaning. She hesitated to wish her papa good night, fearing she had vexed him. But Mr Clifford's manner was full of tenderness; and, as he fondly stroked her head, he said, 'Will my darling Ruth remember what is to be done before we lie down to sleep, when we are conscious of having displeased God?'

'We must pray to be forgiven,' said Ruth, timidly.

'Yes; pray fervently, and for the pardon of that particular offence, for the sake of our blessed Redeemer; lest, if we should continue in our sin, and God should call us to die before we have repented, we should be shut out from His glorious Presence.'

CHAPTER XIV.

ALICE LENNOX, in her solitary chamber, fancied that she alone was the sufferer from all that had passed: and she was indeed the most unhappy; but if she had known all Madeline's feelings, when, on the morning succeeding the storm, she was sent for to her papa's study, she would scarcely have been willing to change places with her. Mr Clifford was in general so affectionate, that anything like coldness was doubly felt; and the expression of his face, when Madeline opened the door, and asked if he wanted her, was grave, and even severe. The reason was, that he did not consider Madeline to be sufficiently aware of the naughtiness of her behaviour. She did not appear

Digitized by Google

to care about it as she ought; and it was for this reason that he required her to go to him. At first he said a few words about the grief which it caused him and her mamma, to find that they could no longer trust her; and then, by asking questions, he made her repeat again the whole history of her fault, and drew from her the confession that she had once or twice been tempted to equivocate, in order to conceal what she had done. He described to her the distress which she had brought upon Lady Catharine, and the sin which Alice had been induced to commit, from having, like herself, yielded to a slight temptation. He had received a particular account of all from Lady Catharine that morning; and her note, written in great wretchedness of mind, proved how bitterly she felt the disappointment of her hopes of Alice's good behaviour. 'If you had been firm, Madeline,' said Mr Clifford, 'all this could not have been. I do not say that your conduct is any excuse for Alice—she must answer for herself; but I do say that it is very frightful to think how much mischief we may cause by one fault, and that not at first sight a very great one.'

'I never thought Alice would tell stories about anything,' said Madeline.

'Perhaps not, yet she has done so; and you, if you had acted properly, might have prevented it. Just think how differently you would have felt, if, instead of following an idle fancy, you had shown Alice that you were wishing to the very utmost to keep the promise of your baptism; and because you had declared that you would give up pomps, and vanities, and sinful lusts, and keep God's commandments all your life, therefore you were determined, even in such a little matter, to do right, and try and overcome the liking for finery, which your mamma had warned you against. Do you think Alice would have been made the better or the worse by such an example?' Madeline did not reply. 'Whatever may happen now,' continued Mr Clifford, 'whatever pain Alice may have to bear, you must consider that you might in a great measure have prevented it; and I am afraid there will be a great deal of sorrow in store for her.'

'Indeed! indeed! I did not intend to make her unhappy; I did not think I was doing so very wrong,' said Madeline.

'But you did intend to do a little wrong, and you did it wilfully, and went on with it. Could God love you all that time?'

Digitized by Google

'I don't know; I did not think,' said Madeline.

'Ah! that is the mischief; the fault with us all, grown-up people as well as children; we do not think; and the great thing we have to learn is the way to think—the way to remember, at all times, that God is seeing us.'

'I will try, papa, really I will,' replied Madeline.

'But you are going to school, Madeline; you will have many things there to make you forget—lessons, plays, new friends, new subjects to talk about. If you forget at home, how will you remember at school?'

'I can't tell; but I will try to be good, dear papa; won't you believe me? Please don't look so grave at me.' As she spoke, Madeline was about, as usual, to throw her arms round her father's neck and kiss him; but she drew back as soon as the thought crossed her; she did not dare, for he had not told her that she was forgiven.

'You say you will try to-day, Madeline; and to-morrow temptation will come again, and you will be as before; you will laugh, and play, and be led to do wrong, merely because you do not think; and when you have done wrong, you will make excuses, and by and by you will be sorry, and beg to be forgiven; and so, probably, you will go on. Who can trust you?'

'Oh, papa! I wish you would not say so. I am very sorry.' Poor Madeline's tears now began to flow fast, but Mr Clifford's manner did not change. 'Who can trust you, Madeline?' he said again. Madeline heaved a deep sigh; and, leaning her head against the back of her papa's chair, she cried bitterly. There was a silence of several moments. Mr Clifford took up his pen and commenced writing, whilst Madeline remained in the same position. 'If I were to punish you,' he began, without raising his eyes from his employment—

'I would rather be punished,' exclaimed Madeline; 'only if you would not look so grave at me.'

'My looking grave is not the principal thing for you to fear,' replied Mr Clifford; 'the important question is, how God is regarding you.'

'I was very sorry, indeed I was, papa,' said Madeline; 'and I did try to say my prayers last night.' The words were spoken with sincerity; and Mr Clifford, laying down his pen, turned to his little girl, and in a voice which showed that he loved her truly, notwithstanding the severity of his manner, he said,

Digitized by Google

'If God has forgiven you, my dear child, if I could hope that you have really prayed to him, then, indeed, I should be happy.'

'But I did say my prayers, just as you told me; and I mentioned all the naughty things, about the sashes, and not speaking out plainly, and doing what mamma would not like; I said it all, and the prayer for when I had been very naughty.'

'And were you really very sorry?' asked Mr Clifford. 'But suppose you were not sorry enough.'

'I don't know; how can I tell? Indeed I was sorry; indeed I said it all, and I thought about it,' repeated Madeline, miserable at the idea of doubt.

'But what right had you to expect that God would listen to you, such a naughty child as you had been?'

'Oh, papa! I don't understand; you never talked so before,' exclaimed Madeline, again bursting into tears.

'Because I never had an occasion. Your prayers, and mine, and every person's, are the prayers of sinners; and God is perfectly holy, and, the Bible tells us, "of purer eyes than to behold iniquity;" that is, He cannot bear to look upon sin. If we go before Him in our own name, what hope can we have that He will listen to us?'

'But I said through Jesus Christ our Lord,' said Madeline, and she bent her head reverently.

Mr Clifford smiled, as he was accustomed to do. 'You were right, Madeline,' he replied, 'and if you did indeed say through Jesus Christ, our Lord, because you knew that God would only listen to you for His sake, then I can hope that you are forgiven. To think of our blessed Lord, and to ask Him to pray for us, because we are too sinful to be heard ourselves, is our great duty and comfort when we have done wrong. I think, now, you are sorry.'

Madeline at these words looked up with greater confidence; and venturing once more to approach her father, she said, 'Can you kiss me, papa?' Mr Clifford's manner showed how truly he could pardon when he had reason to believe that repentance was sincere; but Madeline was not yet fully satisfied. 'Am I to do anything, papa?' she said.

'Anything disagreeable, you mean, for a punishment: do you think you deserve it?'

'I was very naughty, I know,' said Madeline.

'And if I were to give you a punishment, how would you bear it?'

Digitized by Google

'I would try not to mind,' said Madeline, though she trembled at what might be coming.

'If I were to punish you, my dear child,' said Mr Clifford, 'it would be in order to make you remember, not to make you sorry; for that I hope and believe you are already. It was God's punishment which did that.'

Madeline looked up rather wonderingly.

'You have been very unhappy lately, have you not?'

'Yes, very.' Madeline spoke heartily, for she began to feel what a weight she had had upon her heart.

'That unhappiness was sent by God; it was the consequence of your sin, and at last it led you to confess it; the great thing now is to prevent you from forgetting, and going wrong again; perhaps that might be done without what you would call punishment.' Poor Madeline's face brightened; she had fancied that she should be forbidden to play in the garden, or should be sent to bed an hour earlier for the next week or ten days. 'I think,' continued Mr Clifford, 'that if you were to come to my study every day at half-past twelve o'clock, just when your morning lessons are finished, and were to repeat to me what I shall think right, it would help you to remember all you have done, and teach you to be on your guard. I should like you to try at least.'

'Is it anything I am to learn?' said Madeline.

'No, something you know perfectly already—the Creed; and if you want to understand why I fix upon that, I must tell you the same story which I did to Ruth last night, and try and explain more particularly what the Creed means.'

'I heard about the two little girls when we were dressing this morning,' said Madeline.

'Then you know how the elder one learned to remember and think about her father, by reading the account of his life; and did Ruth tell you, also, what I said that was like?'

'No; the bell rang,' replied Madeline, 'and we were obliged to go down-stairs.'

'It was like the way in which we learn to think of God and our blessed Saviour, by repeating that short history of the great things the Bible teaches us, which is contained in the Creed: but the difficulty is to repeat it, not as a lesson or a thing of course, but as something very important; and this I hope you will do by and by. Now, go and fetch Ruth, and we will see if we cannot understand better than before what we learn in the Creed.'

Digitized by Google

Ruth was soon found; she had been wondering a little what was going on; and wishing, above all things, to know whether Madeline was forgiven. Since the last night's conversation she had really felt ashamed of her own conceit; and she had been trying all the morning to make Madeline happy, and to show by her manner that she did not mean to set herself up, although she had not been guilty of the same offence. Ruth was in earnest in desiring to be good; and when she was told of a fault, she really did try to improve, at least for a time. That she went back again was, indeed, frequently the case; but this was from forgetfulness, and not because she had never cared about it; it was, therefore, a real pleasure to her to see how much more at ease Madeline looked when she came into the school-room; and when she was told that her papa had forgiven without punishing, Ruth's face lighted up with a sweet smile; and, throwing down her work, she exclaimed, 'O Madeline! that is so nice, and we will go on happily now; we will not be naughty again, either of us, ever.'

'And papa will talk to mamma, I am sure,' said Madeline; 'you know he always does when he wants her to forgive us too.'

'I never fear about mamma,' observed Ruth, 'she wanted to make it all up last night, I know. She looked quite miserable when you went to bed.'

Madeline was struck by this, and presently said, 'Was she really miserable, do you think, Ruth?'

'Yes, very: I am certain.'

'And papa was grave, and so were you; and poor mamma was miserable,' continued Madeline. 'I did not think I had done anything so very bad.'

'I don't think you had,' replied Ruth, fancying it right to make the best of her sister's conduct. 'At any rate, it was not like the stories which Alice told. I can't think how she could have done it. How Lady Catharine will punish her!'

'O Ruth, please don't say so!' exclaimed Madeline, remembering that her papa had said that whatever Alice might have to bear, she might in a great measure have prevented; 'it makes things seem much worse. But I didn't mean to make you all unhappy. Is there any harm, I wonder, in making people unhappy, when we don't mean it?'

This was not an easy question to answer; and Madeline at that instant recollected that all this time she ought to have been in her papa's study. 'No more work, Ruth,' she said, taking

Digitized by Google

the needle and thread from her sister's hand; I don't want you to finish before me; and papa is waiting.'

Ruth willingly replaced her needle in its case, folded up her work, and closed her basket. Talking to her papa, even upon grave subjects, was much pleasanter than learning to stitch wristbands; and with a light, merry step she followed Madeline. Her smile was checked, however, when she looked in her papa's face. He was plainly more careworn than usual; and Ruth saw in a moment, from his look, that anything like play and laughter would be against his wishes. All that had occurred seemed trifling to her; but to him it was a cause for much anxiety. A child's fault is like the bud on the tree, which, if allowed to grow, must one day become a full blossom; and the evil disposition which made Madeline thoughtless and Ruth conceited, might end in that neglect of God, and that pride of heart, which would at length shut them out from heaven. This, however, was not the principal thought in Mr Clifford's mind at that moment. He hoped and believed that his children were conscious of their errors; and his only wish was to impress upon them the sense of what they had done wrong, so that under other temptations they might be afraid of yielding. 'Here is a place for you, Ruth,' he said, pointing to the seat in the half-open window, through which came the sweet scent of the jessamines and roses which grew over the house: 'and Madeline shall bring her chair next to mine.' This was a sign of Madeline's complete forgiveness; and as she drew near, and put her hand within her papa's, she wondered how it could ever have entered into her head to do anything which would displease him. 'We were talking of the Creed last night, Ruth, if you remember,' said Mr Clifford; 'and I was trying to show you why it was a good thing for us to learn and repeat it; but I daresay even now it does not seem very clear to you.'

'I remember about the story,' said Ruth.

'Yet perhaps the account of her papa's life, which little Mary read over so often, sounds as if it must have been more interesting than the Creed.'

'I think it must have been a great deal more,' said Madeline.

'Most likely,' replied her father; 'the Creed is not a pretty story, and it requires an effort to attend to and understand it; but so it does to say our prayers, or read the Bible. God does not teach any of us to be religious without trouble; and the great question is, whether we will take it, or whether we are resolved to be indolent. What shall I say for you both?'

Digitized by Google

'I mean to try, papa,' replied Madeline, speaking humbly; for she was not inclined to trust herself after her late faults.

'And Ruth will try also, I am sure,' said Mr Clifford; and he smiled to see the earnest way in which his little girl bent her eyes upon him, as if her face would promise much better than her words. 'If you could both fully understand and believe what is told us in the Creed,' he continued, 'you would no longer find it difficult to be religious. Suppose that, instead of having learned it by heart, you were to hear it for the first time to-day, what do you think you should feel about it?' The children did not know what to answer, and Mr Clifford went on. 'We will fancy,' he said, 'a little heathen child—an Indian, accustomed to live in the forests, and never having been taught anything about God; would it not be very astonishing to him to be told that there was a glorious Being, who had always lived before the sun, or the moon, or the stars were created, and who must live always, even if everything else were to be destroyed? When he repeated the words—"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," and then looked upwards to the blue sky, and abroad over the beautiful earth, I do not think he would consider them, as we often do, a lesson. He might not, indeed, rightly understand them; but he would feel that they meant something wonderful. Or let us take a case from among ourselves. Let us imagine ourselves tempted to do something wrong—to be deceitful, or dishonest, or inclined to tell a falsehood; and that just before we actually did this wrong thing, we were called on to repeat the Belief—what would it remind us of?'

'Of God and our Saviour,' replied Ruth.

'Yes; not only that there is a God, but of all which He has done for us. We should say, in fact, though not actually in words, that we have now in heaven a Father who is able to do all things, because He is the Father Almighty; that we have also a Lord and Master, our Saviour Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, who, in order to save us from the punishment due to our sins, undertook to suffer for us; that this gracious Redeemer was, by the power of the Holy Spirit, born like ourselves, of a human mother, the blessed Virgin Mary; and, having left the unspeakable happiness of heaven, came down upon earth to live amongst sinners, without a home, or riches, or comforts of any kind. We should be reminded that after thirty-three long years had gone by, which He spent in teach-

Digitized by Google

ing and trying to make people good, and curing their sicknesses, He was allowed by the governor of the country where he lived, named Pontius Pilate, to be crucified—that is, His hands and feet were nailed to a cross, and He was left to endure more horrible agony than we can even imagine, until He gave up His earthly life, and suffered His body to be laid in the grave, as ours must one day be, when God shall call us to die. His Spirit descended into hell—that is, not the place of torment (as the name, indeed, often means), but the abode of the spirits of the dead, who are waiting for the day of resurrection. Besides these awful truths, we should remember also that, on the third day after our Saviour's death, He by His own power rose from the grave, and went up again into heaven, to that glorious world which, for our sakes, He had left, and where now He dwells with God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit, and the holy angels, who are ever loving and praising Him. If we recollected and thought of this Friend, and of all the suffering He went through for us, do you think we could go away and do directly afterwards the naughty thing which He has told us not to do?'

Mr Clifford looked at Madeline; but tears were in her eyes, and she did not venture to answer. She was thinking of the temptation to which she had so lately given way, and wishing that she had before remembered all that her papa was now bringing to her mind. There was a pause for some moments, and then Ruth, in a tone of surprise, said, 'That is not all the Creed, papa.'

'No,' replied Mr Clifford; 'but it is sufficient to give us a great deal to think about. It is very awful; yet that which is to come will perhaps seem still more so. It concerns each of us particularly, whether we are young or old. What is it that follows the words—"He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty?"'

'"From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead,"' replied Ruth.

'Perhaps,' continued Mr Clifford, 'we might be so hard-hearted as not to care to please our Saviour, because of His love for us; we might repeat the Creed as far as we have yet gone, and still resolve to sin; but there is something else to be thought of, which, if we said the words with any attention, would, I hope, frighten us, or at least make us stay to consider whether it would be safe to displease our gracious Lord. We

Digitized by Google

are told that, some day—it may be a hundred, or fifty, or twenty years hence, or it may be in a few months or weeks, or it may be (no man knows) to-morrow, or, more fearful still, it may be this very day before the sun goes down—that same merciful Saviour, who died upon the cross, and rested in the grave, and then ascended to sit at the right hand of God, will appear again: but He will come, not as the Son of a human mother, but as the Son of His Almighty Father, as the Lord of heaven and earth. He has Himself warned us what the manner of that coming will be—"with power and great glory." The sun, which now shines so brightly, will be darkened, and the moon will not give her light, and the stars will fall from heaven. The sound of a mighty trumpet will be heard; and the voice of the archangel, the chief of all the angels, will call upon the quick and the dead—those who shall at that time be living, as you and I may be living, and those who have died before—to appear before the judgment-seat of the Almighty. It is impossible for us fully to imagine that scene: but once—it is now more than 1700 years ago—a human being was permitted to have a vision of what it shall be. St John the Evangelist, the disciple whom Jesus loved, saw "a great white throne, and Him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away, and there was found no place for them. And he saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened, and another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books: and whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." This was the vision, the representation of what will be. We must have been amongst that infinite multitude; do you think St John saw our names written in the book of life?' Madeline hid her face upon the table. 'I would not willingly frighten you, my child,' continued Mr Clifford, 'but indeed it is necessary that we should think of these things; that when we say we believe that Christ our Lord will come to judge the quick and the dead, we should understand that He will come to judge, not grievous sinners only—the drunkard and the thief—not merely our neighbours and our friends, but ourselves.'

'Will He forgive us, if we are very sorry then?' said Ruth, eagerly.

'The time for seeking forgiveness will be over on that day,' replied Mr Clifford; 'that time is now.'

Digitized by Google

'But if we are very sorry, very sorry indeed,' said Ruth.

Mr Clifford shook his head: 'Every one will be very sorry indeed then, Ruth. The greatest sinner who ever lived, the man who was most careless, who even laughed at the thought of death and judgment, will be very sorry indeed; but his sorrow will come too late.'

'Too late!' repeated Ruth, thoughtfully.

'Yes; it is not a strange thing, is it, to find ourselves too late even in this life? There are instances happening daily, and they are warnings, if we will but profit by them. I will give you one, which I am sure you have not forgotten. Do you not remember the very last time we went from Cottington to Ringwood, when I said I would take you by the railroad? You were called early, your box was ready, your breakfast was prepared, there was nothing wanting, but that you should be dressed in time. Instead of dressing, you played; you thought one minute could not signify. Your mamma warned you, but you did not listen. You did not understand that there was anything in the world so fixed that it would not stop for you, even though it might be a question of life and death. At length we set off; we walked quickly, and looked about us continually, and often I said that I feared we should be too late; but you did not comprehend how it could be possible. It was but a short walk, and we saw the great steam-engine as it stopped opposite the station-house; we even watched the people moving about the carriages, and we heard the panting noise of the engine, and the calling of the policemen. We drew nearer and nearer, and you thought we were quite safe; —there was a slight motion in the train, and the smoke ascended into the air, and as the people who were standing by stood still, and fixed their eyes upon the long line of carriages, it rushed swiftly away, and we found ourselves one minute too late. No exertions, no entreaties, could avail us then. That was being one minute too late for an earthly journey, but it is equally possible to be too late for heaven.'

'But must children repent?' asked Ruth quickly.

Mr Clifford waited for an instant, and leaned his head upon his hand, as if some painful thought had struck him: 'All who sin must repent,' he said; 'and death may come suddenly upon any one. If you had been in the boat last night with old Roger, you might have sunk in the waves, and been drowned, as he was.'

Digitized by Google

Ruth seemed alarmed even at the idea: 'But we never go on the water when it looks stormy, papa,' she said.

'Yet what do you say to other dangers, Ruth?—accidents in carriages, or in walking, or by lightning, or by sudden illnesses? The present is the only time on which we may reckon for repentance, for there is no moment at which we may not die.' As Mr Clifford spoke, Madeline sighed heavily, but she did not look up. 'It is enough to make us grave, is it not, Madeline?' continued her father, placing his hand fondly on her head, 'God means that it should do so. But whenever we feel this fear, and begin to think, as you said the other day, that it is impossible to be good, we should remember that there are other things told us in the Creed to support and give us hope. If we believe in "God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord," so we believe also in God the Holy Ghost, and this belief is one of the greatest possible blessings; can you tell me why?'

'Because He will help us to do right,' said Ruth.

'Yes, indeed, He will. We have but to pray to Him constantly, and there is no difficulty which need be too great for us. From the moment when, as little infants, we were made at our baptism members of Christ's holy Catholic Church, that Holy Spirit was given to us to be our guide; and if, when we say our prayers, we ask Him to continue with us, we may be certain that He will never forsake us. We shall not be able to tell exactly how He assists us, but we shall find good thoughts coming to our minds just at the moment we want them; and, instead of giving way to our evil tempers, we shall find that we have a power of overcoming them. It will be strange, even to ourselves, to observe, how much easier it will become every day to be good. And all this is to be done by praying.'

'But if we only pray,' said Ruth, 'will that do as well as trying?'

'If I were very ill, Ruth, and knew of a medicine which I believed would cure me, would it do me any good if I would not send for it?' Ruth smiled at the idea. 'Or supposing I actually held it in my hand, would it be any use to me unless I opened my mouth and swallowed it? In both these cases I should have something to do myself, and yet it would not be the doing it which would cure me; and so it is with our hearts. We have to pray and to try with all our strength, and if we do pray and try, God will give us His Holy Spirit to make us

Digitized by Google

good, but if we neglect either of these commands, even the the power of that blessed Spirit will be of no avail to us.'

During this conversation it was difficult to know how far Madeline was listening or not. She did not try to speak, or show that she took an interest; only every now and then she drew her hand across her eyes, to wipe away the tears which were fast falling down her cheek. Mr Clifford saw that she had been struck by the solemnity of the subjects on which they had spoken; and, motioning to Ruth, he told her to leave them for a little while alone: 'We will finish talking another time,' he said; and as Ruth left the room he turned to Madeline, and added, mildly, 'there has been enough to think of to-day.' Madeline felt even Ruth's absence a relief in her present state of mind; and when she found that her sister was gone, her fears were told without any reserve. Mr Clifford's manner had lost every trace of sternness; and as he listened to Madeline's anxious question, 'Whether he thought that God had really forgiven her?' he had no longer any doubt of her true repentance. He did not speak to her then of the awfulness of the Almighty, but of His mercy. He reminded her how long years before God had loved and thought of her, and sent His blessed Son to die for her, and at her birth had taken her into His Church, and made her one of that happy family to whom the glories of heaven are promised for the sake of Jesus Christ: 'You are God's child now, my love,' he said; 'His child more fully than you are mine; and Jesus Christ is your Saviour, and will ask for pardon for you: you do not doubt my assurances; but if I can forgive, much more can He, for His mercy is infinite.'

Often and often before had Madeline heard the same words, but she had little attended to their meaning, for she had not felt the need of them. Yet, if a child can sin, so also a child can repent; and as Madeline listened to her father's words, she understood something of the comfort which the knowledge that we have a Saviour who will pray for us, and have compassion upon us, ought to give to all.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XV.

ALTHOUGH Mr Clifford's thoughts were so much engaged with his own children, he did not forget Alice Lennox. She was not indeed his charge in the same way as Ruth and Madeline, but she was living in his parish, and he felt himself bound to watch over her. Notwithstanding Lady Catharine Hyde's formality of manner, he thought it possible that she would like to see and consult with him, what was best to be done with a child who had shown herself so little to be trusted as Alice; but Mr Clifford did not understand Lady Catharine's character. She did not require any advice, for she had made up her mind from the beginning as to the course she was to adopt. She did not ask whether Alice was sorry, or whether it was likely that, if allowed to remain at the Manor, she would improve more than if she went to school; but having once discovered that Alice had disobeyed her, her only idea was to punish her severely, and then send her away. The determination seemed harsh, and yet Lady Catharine's disposition was full of benevolence and kindness. Even Alice, in her solitary room, did not feel more distress than did her truest earthly friend, as she walked through the large but desolate apartments of her house, and missed the light footstep and the cheerful voice which had for the last few months enlivened her sad life; and felt, that for the future, except in the holiday weeks, she must again be lonely.

When Mr Clifford appeared in the afternoon at the Manor, he was accordingly received, not with entreaties for advice, but with a request that he would give the terms and the direction for Mrs Carter's school. 'I shall make a few inquiries myself,' said Lady Catharine; 'and if the answers prove satisfactory, which I have no doubt from your report they will be, I think I cannot do better than place Alice there immediately.'

Mr Clifford was rather at a loss what to say, for he did in his own mind think that Lady Catharine could do better. He believed that, to allow Alice to remain at home, and to treat her with gentleness and firmness, would be more likely to strengthen her principles, and enable her to resist future temptations, than to send her amongst strange companions at school. So he had thought with regard to Madeline; but in her case there was no choice. It was now settled that Mrs Beresford was to come to Laneton; the two children could not therefore remain at home;

Digitized by Google

and Mr Clifford could only trust that constant care, and the influence of early instruction, would, with the blessing of God, be the means of keeping his child in the straight and narrow way of goodness. He did, however, venture to say to Lady Catharine, that he thought it possible that, with Alice's unsteady mind, she might run great risk of evil amongst new companions; but Lady Catharine's answer silenced him. She said, 'That the subject had been well considered—that it was not her custom to act hastily;' and she again asked for Mrs Carter's direction. Mr Clifford gave it, and rose to take leave, when to his surprise Lady Catharine said, 'Will you not see Alice? The advice of the clergyman of the parish, and such a friend as you have always shown yourself, may perhaps have an effect upon her. I shall not go to her myself till the evening.' Mr Clifford was pleased at the offer, as it showed that, notwithstanding her determination, Lady Catharine was desirous to give him an opportunity of becoming better acquainted with Alice's state of mind, and, perhaps, of being of real service to her; and with willing steps he went up-stairs. The door of the dressing-room was unlocked and opened, but Lady Catharine did not enter. She only motioned to Mr Clifford to do so, and withdrew. The shutters were more than half-closed, and the dim light of an afternoon of pouring rain scarcely penetrated into the little room. Alice was kneeling at the window-seat. She was gazing through the chinks of the shutter upon the avenue road. It had been her sole amusement during the whole of the long, weary day; but there was nothing passing, not even the butcher's cart or a stray beggar; and as a last hope of occupation, Alice was trying to count the tiles on the stable-roof, in order, if possible, to divert her thoughts from the wretchedness caused by her own faults.

'Alice,' said Mr Clifford; and, upon hearing his voice, Alice looked up quickly; 'Lady Catharine wished me to come to you. I daresay she will come herself by and by.' Alice made no reply. 'Should you like to see her?' continued Mr Clifford.

'I don't know; she does not care—she is very angry with me,' said Alice, speaking with difficulty.

'Has she not reason to be angry, Alice? Have you not deceived and disobeyed her? And do you think it possible she should ever trust you again?' Alice rested her head again upon the window-seat, while Mr Clifford went on speaking. He talked kindly, but seriously; he reminded her of the duty and

Digitized by Google

affection which she owed to Lady Catharine for her care; of the positive necessity of submitting to her in all things; of the ingratitude which she had shown in breaking the only command which had been specially laid upon her; and then he pointed out to her how much sin and suffering had been caused by the commission of one fault. The indulgence of one wish,' he said, 'the desire to gratify your liking for the bonbons when you knew they were not allowed, led you to be deceitful to Lady Catharine, and selfish, almost cruel, to Madeline; who, though she had done wrong, ought never to have been accused unjustly; and at length it brought you to be guilty of that great sin of lying, which, in the Bible, is spoken of in such fearful language. O, Alice! can you really be indifferent to such conduct? Does it give you no pain to think that your earthly friends doubt you, and grieve over you, and that God, the all-holy, all-merciful God, your Father in heaven, is angry with you?' Mr Clifford paused; he hoped that Alice would speak that he might discover whether she had any sense of the evil of which she was guilty; but Alice still appeared immovable. Yet it would have been a mistake to suppose that she was hardened, and did not feel Mr Clifford's words. she did feel them in her heart, but she did not choose to confess it; perhaps towards Lady Catharine she would have been more humble, but with Mr Clifford she was partly shy and partly obstinate; and a sudden determination seized her not to answer to anything which was said; she was wilful by nature; and the consciousness of having behaved very ill made her still more so. Finding that serious words took no effect, Mr Clifford tried more gentle ones: he had seen that Alice was really fond of Lady Catharine; and he described how much she was grieved; how pale and worn she looked, and what an effort it was to her to talk upon all that had passed; and then Alice was more wretched than before, and more resolved that she would not show it. Mr Clifford was extremely disappointed; he was accustomed to see his own children give way whenever he reproved them; and he did not know how to deal with a disposition so perverse. He again addressed Alice kindly, and begged her to look up and answer him; but his words were entirely thrown away. Every moment that Alice continued obstinate strengthened her resolution of taking no notice, because it made her more ashamed of doing better. It would have been easy to have spoken at first, but when many minutes had gone by it became almost impossible; and Mr Clifford,

Digitized by Google

finding that his persuasions were useless, gave up the attempt. 'As you will, then, Alice,' he said: 'I came in the hope of finding you penitent, and begging for Lady Catharine's forgiveness; since you will not listen to me, you do not need it; when I see you next I trust you may be in a better mind.' He turned to leave the room, and pausing in the doorway, cast one more glance upon Alice, trusting even then that she would have spoken; but whatever might have been her grief she suffered nothing of it to appear. Lady Catharine was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs; she did not ask any questions, but her countenance expressed anxious expectation. Mr Clifford shook his head: 'It is a disposition I cannot understand,' he said; 'but I do not really think she is as insensible as she tries to appear; your ladyship probably will be more successful.'

'And will she not own that she has been wrong?' exclaimed Lady Catharine.

'She will own nothing; but she has been crying, and is evidently in great distress of mind; it might have been shyness which prevented her from speaking to me.' Mr Clifford hoped by this observation to induce Lady Catharine to go at once to Alice; but the resolution to wait till the morning was made, and it was not to be broken. Mr Clifford took his hat, and prepared to go. Lady Catharine's face was pale, and her manner agitated. Mr Clifford would willingly have said something to console her, but she did not give him the opportunity: she held out her hand, and warmly returned his cordial pressure, but she said merely the ordinary words at parting; and Mr Clifford returned home, disappointed both with her and with Alice.

And so that day passed, and the next, and the day after; nothing was known of what was going on at the Manor; even the servants did not meet; and whether Alice was forgiven, or whether Lady Catharine was still resolved upon sending her to school, remained a mystery. The children at the Parsonage were now busily occupied; for the day was fast approaching when they were to leave home. There was a good deal of amusement in the preparations, notwithstanding the unpleasant thoughts connected with them: new dresses were to be tried on, new books to be ordered, workboxes and drawing-boxes to be fitted up, and a visit to Cottington was in contemplation to buy whatever was still wanting. All this was agreeable enough;

Digitized by Google

but when Madeline went each day to her papa's study at the appointed hour, to repeat the Creed, as he had desired, a remembrance of shame and self-reproach came to her mind; and when Mr Clifford made her stop to collect her thoughts, and then said a few words to her upon the awfulness of the subjects of which she was about to speak, Madeline's mind was sobered: she felt that she was forgiven, but she was not allowed to forget.

There were other circumstances which at that time served to cast something of gloom over the Parsonage. The sudden death of the old fisherman had been a great shock to almost every one in Laneton; and Mr Clifford, as he went from house to house, and heard the regrets, and witnessed the tears which were shed for his loss, could not help sympathising with the general grief. The children also saw that such an awful event must be intended as a warning; and when the Sunday arrived which was fixed for the funeral, they thought it sad to see the sun shine bright and hear the birds sing, when the old man who, only the week before, had been able to enjoy himself likewise, was about to be laid in the darkness and stillness of the grave. Mr Clifford was silent in the morning at breakfast, and walked alone in the garden before the service began; and when he read from the pulpit the text which he had chosen for his sermon: 'Watch, therefore, for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come,'—there was a little hesitation in his voice. But the death of the righteous (and such there was every reason to believe Roger Dyson might with truth be called) must ever be a cause rather of hope and thankfulness than of sorrow, and when Ruth and Madeline joined their father after the funeral service was over, there was even a cheerfulness of manner which showed that to him the remembrance of death could never be unwelcome.

'It seems such a sad day,' said Ruth, as she took hold of her papa's hand: 'I wish people would not choose to be buried on a Sunday.'

'It is not often a choice,' observed Mr Clifford: 'generally speaking, it is necessity, or at least a matter of convenience. But, to my notions, Sunday is the best day to fix on for a funeral, because it is the one which brings with it the greatest comfort: it is the memorial of our Lord's Resurrection.'

'Yes,' replied Ruth, 'mamma said so too, just now; but it does not seem right either; it makes every one melancholy; and you know, papa, Sunday ought always to be happy.'

Digitized by Google

'It would not make us melancholy, if we thought rightly, my love. Even if we had lost a dear friend, there would be as much of peace and joy, as of grief in our feelings.'

'Not about any person,' said Ruth.

'No, certainly not; but I am speaking of cases, like the present, in which we have every reason to believe that our loss is another's gain. Roger Dyson was, I most truly think, a faithful member of the Catholic Church, and we may without presumption trust that his spirit is at rest.'

'You mean, because he was baptized, don't you, papa?' said Ruth.

'Not entirely, my dear. There are a great many persons who are baptized; but, I am afraid, they cannot all when they die be really accounted, in God's sight, members of His holy Catholic Church. Of course it is not for us to decide in any particular instance, because those who have done wrong may have repented; but when we know that persons have been thieves, or drunkards, or liars, or passionate, or have, in fact, given way wilfully to any sin, we cannot feel sure that they will be accepted at the day of judgment as belonging to the Church of Christ. We know that they will not be, if they have died in their sin.'

'But they belonged to it once,' said Ruth.

'Yes; but they may by their own fault be cast out of it, as a child may be turned from his home, and considered as no longer one of the family. Even here on earth, sinners are sometimes cast out of the Church—they are excommunicated; that is, they are publicly and solemnly cut off from the privileges and blessings of the Church; and especially are not allowed to receive the Holy Communion.'

'Old Roger always went to Laneton church,' said Madeline.

'Yes, but when we talk of Laneton church, or Cottington church, or Winslow, or Markland churches, we mean only different buildings; when we speak of the Church of Christ, or the Catholic Church, we mean the people who go to worship in those buildings. Catholic, you know, is not the name of a place—it means universal, that is, belonging to all countries, and all ages.'

'Then there are a great many built churches,' said Madeline.

'Yes, but only one Catholic Church.'

'I think I know what you mean, papa,' said Ruth; 'all the people who are baptized and go to church.'

Digitized by Google

'Those belonging to the Catholic Church in England,' said Mr Clifford, 'but the Catholic Church is also in America, and Scotland, and France, and Italy, and many other countries besides.'

'That makes a great many,' said Ruth; 'they cannot all be one.'

'Are you sure of that, Ruth? You have an uncle in America, and another in India, and another in Jamaica: do they not all belong to one family?'

'Yes, I see, papa, but'——

'But what? do not be afraid to speak, my love.'

'Are the churches in other countries quite like ours, papa? Do the people say just the same prayers, and have they books like ours?'

'Not exactly; but I daresay your uncles do not live exactly alike. It is impossible they should, indeed, yet that does not prevent them from belonging to one family. They may dress differently, and get up at different hours, and have a great many different habits, but they are still brothers, the children of one parent.'

'And the churches in Scotland, and France, and America, and all the places you mentioned, are brothers?' said Ruth.

'Sisters rather they are called, but I cannot explain the reason to you now.'

'But,' said Ruth, and a shade of perplexity came over her face, 'it is not the same either; all the churches in different countries cannot have the same parent.'

'They may be descended from the same,' replied Mr Clifford; 'your cousins in America, for instance, belong to our family; but your uncle Edmond is their father, and I am yours: and the same with your cousins in India and Jamacia. There may be several different fathers, but all will have come from one person, that is, your grandfather.'

'And the churches all over the world must have come from one,' said Ruth, still looking confused.

'Yes, from our Lord Jesus Christ, the great head of the Universal Church.'

'But who are all the fathers?' asked Ruth, quickly.

'The bishops are,' replied Mr Clifford; 'they are called Right Reverend Fathers in God. You know the first bishops were the twelve apostles. Our Saviour gave to them a special gift of the Holy Ghost, and before their death they were

Digitized by Google

directed to choose other persons to be bishops likewise; and to ordain them by laying their hands upon them, and praying for the blessing of God. Our Lord then gave to these persons authority, such as apostles had, and so it has gone on down to the present day.'

'Then the bishops are all like brothers,' said Madeline.

'Yes, and they all have the same power given them by God to rule the Church and to make clergymen, like me and Mr Monckton of Cottington.'

'Then who is it we read about to mamma in our history?' asked Ruth, 'the pope, I mean.'

'He is a bishop—the bishop of Rome.'

'But in the history,' said Ruth, 'it talks about him as if he were bishop of England.'

'Yes, some hundred years after the apostles, the bishop of Rome set himself up above the others who were his brothers; and because he had been looked up to, and allowed to decide in cases of difficulty, just as an elder brother might do, he declared he was to rule in everything.'

'But why did the others let him do it?' asked Ruth.

'They did not at first, they said constantly that he was very wrong; but he and the bishops of Rome who came after him, persisted, till at last people began to believe them, and then they had their own way, and ruled everything in England and France, and everywhere.'

'They don't do so now,' said Ruth.

'No, because three hundred years ago, the king and parliament of England, and the bishops of the Catholic Church in England, said that they had no business to do it; that they might rule Rome, but they had no right to rule in England. There was a great quarrel about it, and since then, the bishops in England have not paid any attention to the false claims of the bishops of Rome.'

'Did a bishop make you a clergyman, papa?' asked Madeline.

'Yes, no one else could do it. The first Christians did not allow any persons to teach and administer the Holy Sacraments, except such as had been what is called ordained by a bishop.'

'And that is the reason you were ordained,' said Ruth.

'Yes; first of all, I was made a deacon, by having the bishop's hands laid upon my head, after he had prayed for me. When this was done I was allowed to perform the greater part

Digitized by Google

of the service, but not the whole. I could not pronounce the absolution or forgiveness of sins, nor consecrate the bread and wine in the Holy Communion. When I had acted as deacon for two or three years, I was made a priest in the same way, by the authority of the bishop, and now I may perform the whole duty.'

'Did old Roger understand about it all?' inquired Ruth.

Mr Clifford smiled. 'It is not very likely he did; yet he may have been more truly a Christian than you or I are. It is not knowing, but believing and doing, which will, for our Saviour's sake, gain us admittance into heaven.'

'And does Roger belong to any Church now?' asked Ruth.

'To the Catholic Church still. Those who have been holy members of Christ's Church upon earth, continue to be so, only in a far more blessed state of peace and safety, after they die.'

'God takes care of them,' said Ruth.

'Yes, just as He took care of them upon earth, and as He takes care of us; and our Saviour loves them, and the Holy Spirit comforts them; they belong to God's family exactly the same, whether we see them or not; and after the Resurrection they and we, I hope, shall all live together in heaven. So that we have a great deal in common with all good and holy persons, even when they are gone from this world, because they are living still, and have the same God to protect them, and the same home of perfect happiness to look forward to.'

'And, papa, do you think old Roger knows anything about us now?'

'It is impossible for me to say,' replied Mr Clifford, 'because there is so very little information upon such subjects in the Bible. God has not seen fit to reveal to what degree the friends we have lost from our sight can still take an interest in us, or care about us.'

'Roger was not one of our friends, exactly,' said Ruth, 'so he would not care about us.'

'That does not follow, Ruth; wherever his spirit may now be, he must understand far better than we can hope to do, the importance of all which passes here. He feels the peace which our Saviour has promised to all who love Him; and he knows how dreadful it would be to be looking forward to the punishment of sin, instead of the great joy of heaven. The other world is like a dream to us, but it is all real to him, just as real as that

Digitized by Google

we are walking in this garden, and looking upon the trees and the sea. And if he could know that we are risking the loss of heaven by giving way to any known sin, whether it be a great one or a little one, it must be more frightful than it would be to us to watch a man hanging over that high cliff by a single thread.'

'But, papa,' said Ruth, 'good people now care when they see wicked ones, because mamma was very unhappy the other day when Ralph Haynes had been stealing.'

'Yes,' replied Mr Clifford, 'the better we are, the more sorry we shall be for sinners; especially for those who are members of the Church, and yet disobey God.'

'But we ought to be angry with them, ought we not?' said Ruth.

'How do you think Madeline would feel if you had done wrong?' inquired Mr Clifford. Ruth blushed; she knew why her papa did not ask her how she would feel if Madeline were in fault.

'I should be very sorry,' said Madeline.

'I am sure you would: you love Ruth, for she is your sister, you belong to one family. God has a family too; some upon earth, and some, like old Roger, in the world of departed spirits, and those who are particularly our brothers and sisters upon earth, are the members of the Church. We ought to attend to, and assist, and think of them before any others. It will be no good to recollect about the Communion of Saints in heaven, if we forget those who are living.'

'But, papa,' said Ruth, in surprise, 'Church people are not saints?'

'Some are, Ruth, and all ought to be.'

'A great many are very wicked, I know,' continued Ruth.

'Then their punishment will be the greater. God has given them the opportunity of being good, by taking them into His Church, and bestowing upon them His Holy Spirit.'

'And must we care about them if they are ever so bad?' said Ruth.

'We must care by trying to teach them better. Church people are more our relations than others, I think you must understand now.'

'I am glad Roger was a Church person,' said Ruth.

'So am I, Ruth; it gives me a feeling that he belongs to us; and it makes me happy to think that he is surely

Digitized by Google

forgiven and accepted, because he trusted in his Saviour, and tried to live to God.'

'He can never be sinful now,' observed Ruth. Mr Clifford walked on a few paces in silence. Ruth had said what had been in his own thoughts often during the day.

'His grave is made under the old yew-tree, in the east corner of the churchyard; shall we go and look at it?' he asked. Ruth put her hand within his, whilst Madeline went forward to open the little gate which led into the lane, dividing the churchyard from the Parsonage garden.

It was a sheltered, quiet spot which had been chosen for the last resting-place of the old fisherman. The ivy-covered wall protected it from the keen blast of the east wind, and the knotted branches of the dark yew spread over it, as if to guard it from the rays of the mid-day sun. There were not many graves near it; only a few crumbling stones marked the spots where, in long past years, others, humble like himself, had been committed to the dust; beings, whose names, forgotten upon earth, were scarcely to be discovered from the half-defaced letters which had recorded them, but whose souls, resting in the hands of God, were awaiting the unchangeable sentence either of condemnation or of mercy. 'His trial is over,' were the first words which Mr Clifford spoke; 'the end of ours is yet to come.' Ruth fixed her eyes on the newly turned-up earth; it seemed impossible that one who had so lately lived and moved amongst them, should then be lying motionless beneath it.

'Did he never do anything wrong?' asked Madeline, in a whispered voice.

'Yes, Madeline; often, very often; no day passed without it.'

'But, papa, he is happy.'

'Happy, we may believe, as surely as we can believe it of any human being; but it is not because he never sinned, but because for the sake of the Saviour in whom he believed, his sins are forgiven.'

'And God will forgive us, too,' said Madeline, in a half anxious, half confident tone.

'Yes, if we repent and amend here; the forgiveness of sins is promised to us now, but we are not told of forgiveness in the world of spirits.'

'Only now?' said Madeline, as if the thought had struck her for the first time.

Digitized by Google

'Only now!' repeated Mr Clifford; and, leaning against the old wall, he covered his face with his hands. There was a silence of some minutes; the children stood at the head of the fisherman's grave, and gazed mournfully around. Sweet summer flowers were springing amidst the green turf, and insects were buzzing in the warm, misty air; the songs of birds fell blithely upon the ear, and the distant lowing of cattle, and the tinkling of sheep bells, mingled with the low murmur of the waves which were breaking upon the sandy shore. At that moment all were unheeded, and a sense of the awfulness of death came over them such as they had never felt before.

'It seems so still, so quiet,' said Ruth, as she drew nearer to her father's side. Mr Clifford looked at her and smiled.

'It is right that it should be so, is it not, Ruth? They who dwell here have given up all interest in the noise and the business of this world; they are quiet themselves, and the place of their rest should be quiet likewise.'

'They will never hear anything again,' said Madeline, and the thought seemed full of sadness.

'Yes, Madeline, they will; one sound there is for which they are all waiting—the sound of the archangel's trumpet, which will summon the dead and the living to judgment. The bodies that are now mouldering away will then live, and move, and breathe again, even as we wake from our nightly rest to the business and the pleasures of the day.'

'But it does not seem that it can be,' said Ruth, thoughtfully.

'It is hard to think so when we look upon the graves of the dead,' replied her father; 'but it is not hard when we look upon the earth and the sky. The God who could make the universe can do all things; and the Saviour who raised Himself from the tomb will not fail to raise us likewise.'

'To wake again!' said Ruth; 'it is so strange!'

'And more strange still, Ruth, the life which we shall then begin to live will not be a short life like this one. It may be happiness so vast that we cannot conceive it, or misery so sad that the sorrows of earth are as nothing in comparison, but there will be no sleep to break it.' Again there was silence, interrupted only by the light, gentle sounds of the summer evening. Mr Clifford's eye wandered over the churchyard; and as it rested upon a lonely grave, apart from all others, in the farthest corner, he slightly shuddered, and an expression of

Digitized by Google

great pain passed over his countenance. 'Are you ill, papa?' said Ruth, anxiously, when she noticed it.

'No, my love;' and the look of peace which accompanied the words made Ruth happy again; 'but there are some things which always come to my mind in a churchyard, especially in this one, and they naturally make me serious; perhaps you would say melancholy.'

'Ought we to think of them, too, papa?'

'It is not possible you should, my love; but there are many here whose lives were sinful, and their deaths, I fear, without repentance, for whom the thought of the life everlasting is full of anxiety'

'Did you know them, papa?' said Madeline.

'Yes; some I knew long, and I tried to warn them, but they would not listen; and there was one, he who is buried by himself beneath the thorn; he had lived a wicked life, and when I spoke to him of his evil ways he mocked at me, and even closed his door against me; and at last, after some time had passed, I thought I would try once more. I went to him, and entreated, as if he had been my own child, that he would repent while yet there was time. He turned from me in anger, and said that he would never suffer me to open my lips to him again; and I never did; God did not suffer it; that very night he was brought home dead.'

'I remember, papa,' said Ruth; 'nurse told me of it; but she did not seem frightened.'

'Because she did not think of that which was to come afterwards. If we could imagine what it must be to enter upon the life of ages upon ages, we should never speak lightly of death.'

'But we may be happy,' said Ruth.

'God in His mercy grant it, my child!' said Mr Clifford, earnestly. 'Yes, we may be happy—happy, as the Bible tells us, in a home so blessed that "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard; neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive" its blessedness. But we may also be miserable, and now is the time of our trial.'

'And when will the end come?' asked Madeline.

'We know nothing about an end in the next world,' replied her father. 'If we were to take a grain of sand from the millions upon millions on the shore, and, moving so slowly that our steps could scarcely be perceived, were to begin our journey towards

Digitized by Google

the very farthest of those distant worlds which shine above us in the evening sky, and when we had left it were again to return for another, and another, and another, till every one of those tiny particles, both here and throughout the world, had been carried away, yet even then, when that immeasurable time had passed, we could not say that we should be nearer to the end of the ages upon ages of the next world, than we are now.'

Madeline tried to think, but she could not; she could not understand, and she felt unhappy.

'We cannot hope to comprehend this clearly, my love,' said Mr Clifford, 'but we shall do well to think about it sometimes. It is easy to speak of the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting; the words come like any other words; they pass our lips easily, but they are, like the name of the all-holy God, awful and vast, and only to be mentioned with the fervent hope that when our bodies are raised, and our souls re-united to them, and we enter upon that wonderful life, it may be a life of joy in the presence of God.' There was a tear in Madeline's eye as she turned to leave the churchyard; it was a tear, not for the dead who were resting there, not for the fisherman, whose cottage was empty, but it was a tear for her own faults—for the sins which, though they had been forgiven, were still so frequently recalled to mind, and which, if she had persisted in them, would have unfitted her for the happiness of heaven. Madeline was learning by degrees that her life on earth, even her life as a little child, was the preparation for the life of Eternity.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW quickly time passes! so we all say, upon meeting friends after absence, or when an event happens which has raised our expectations, or even when we stay quietly in our homes, and occupy ourselves in our daily duties. It is only when we look forward that time seems long. When Ruth and Madeline were first told that they were to go to school, the period seemed years off. Two months appeared as if they would never be over. Yet the days slid by almost without notice, and in the midst of lessons, and play, and the business of

Digitized by Google

preparation, came, almost as if it had never been thought of, the very week fixed for their departure. Time was short to them, for they were usefully engaged, and notwithstanding the prospect of separation, there was much to give them pleasure. But time was very long to one who, like them, had lessons and occupations, but who was conscious that she had forfeited the good opinion of her best friend, and who could never look in her face without being reminded of the grief she had caused her. Alice Lennox was forgiven—forgiven, that is, so far, that after two days of solitary punishment, when her proud heart was in a measure subdued, and Lady Catharine went to her and found her crying, and heard her confess how wrongly she had acted, and beg that Madeline might be told she was sorry, then, and not before, she was allowed to leave her room and return to her usual pursuits. But Alice saw that everything was changed. Lady Catharine never reproached her, and even Marsham ceased to find fault with her. She was allowed to employ herself as much as she chose; but there was but little notice taken of anything which she did. If her lessons were well done, Lady Catharine scarcely looked pleased; if they were badly done, she scarcely seemed to think it worth while to reprove her. And no one spoke to her of the future. No one said, 'This day week, or this day fortnight, such a thing will most probably happen; do you think you shall like it?' and when Lady Catharine once mentioned her intention of paying a visit to a friend, she gave Alice no idea of what would become of her in the meantime. There was an air of mystery over everything, and Alice saw herself suddenly shut out from all the attention which she had before been accustomed to receive. She was nobody. What she did, or what she did not do, seemed equally a matter of indifference. Why, she dared not ask. Lady Catharine was so silent, so occupied, she could not interrupt her. It was not now as it had been, when Alice felt something of a child's privilege with a mother, and knew that she should be listened to with pleasure. Strict though Lady Catharine had formerly been, it had been merely the strictness of over-anxiety and affection; and Alice could better have borne any rules, than she could the being allowed to follow her own will, with no one apparently to care for her.

She began to repent her misconduct far more truly than she had done when shut up in punishment; then she had, indeed, shed tears of sorrow, because she was weary of being alone, and

Digitized by Google

vexed at her own folly for having brought upon herself so much suffering; but she was proud—she thought herself hardly used. Now she had nothing to complain of;—she was fed, and taught, and allowed to walk about and amuse herself. The persons who came to the house saw no marked change in the manner in which she was treated, and yet Alice was wretched. Night after night she laid her head upon her pillow, and cried herself to sleep; and morning after morning she awoke with a heavy weight upon her heart, and a dread of the long day that was before her, without the prospect of a single word of encouragement; and, worse than all, Alice felt that she was no longer trusted. Her word was doubted She was not told so, but she found, that if anything happened in which there was occasion for her to say what she had done, or what she had seen, immediately there was a hesitation—some one else was called in to answer likewise; or, if that could not be, even the servants would pause, and say, 'Well, it might be so, but they could not be certain.' Alice's assurances were no longer taken for truth: this was a most severe trial. Alice Lennox was by nature proud, wilful, and insincere; but she was also warm-hearted and energetic, and full of respect for those whom she knew to be good. Their approbation was the one thing which she longed for, and it was this which had attached her to Lady Catharine when she had been what many persons would have called severely treated. Even, during this heavy time, Alice did not dislike Lady Catharine; she trembled before her, dreaded her appearance, gladly escaped from the breakfast or the dinner table to be out of reach of her eye, but it was only because she was ashamed of herself, because she was conscious that she had forfeited any claim to confidence. Lady Catharine was still religious, benevolent, and self-denying, devoted to God, and unwearied in relieving the wants of her fellow-creatures; and Alice, when she most shrank from the sound of her voice, still felt that it was the voice of one whose goodness she ought sincerely to strive to imitate. Yet a change did come at last. Slowly as the hours passed; yet they did at length bring an alteration in Alice's life. There were preparations for some event; what, she could not tell; but her drawers were overlooked, her linen was counted, her frocks were brought out and tried on, and one whole afternoon Lady Catharine spent in examining her school-books, and putting aside a certain number. There were long consultations between Marsham

Digitized by Google

and her mistress; and Mr Clifford came frequently to the Manor. His coming, however, made but little difference to Alice; he had scarcely noticed her since the day when he had so vainly tried to make an impression upon her. The names of Madeline and Ruth never in her presence passed his lips, except on one occasion, when he had particularly mentioned that Madeline sent her love; and Alice could not bring herself to speak of them. On one day Mr Clifford paid a third visit, a most unusual occurrence, and Alice, having escaped from the drawing-room as he entered, found her way into the garden. It was not for pleasure that she went there. She had her flowers, it is true, but Lady Catharine never asked now how they were looking; and she had a rabbit to pet, but Madeline and Ruth were not there to see how tame it was, or to pick cabbage-leaves to feed it. There was the summer-house to go to, but there was no particular amusement in being in it alone; and there was always something uncomfortable in Alice's mind when she sat there thinking—a recollection of the beginning of her faults, and a remembrance of Benson appearing at the garden gate, and of the day when she had strayed into the servants' court. From thence was to be seen also the end of the house, and the windows of the forbidden rooms. The summer-house could not be agreeable, and Alice preferred sauntering up and down the walks, or sitting upon the steps with her back to the green door into the park; anything rather than be so constantly reminded of how much happier she might have been than she was. She thought of what might be going to happen to her—of the probability that she would be sent to school, the same school with Madeline and Ruth; she should like that; but perhaps Lady Catharine would tell upon her, and all the girls would know that she had been a story-teller and deceitful. It was dreadful to have done something which she was afraid might be known, and the slight feeling of pleasure which Alice had entertained in the prospect of school was gone in an instant. She was lonely and wretched. Now that her dear mamma was gone, it did not seem that there was any one to take an interest in her. Alice had not felt so before, but the misery of her own heart made her overlook every blessing which she still enjoyed. She remembered Benson, but the remembrance did not give her pleasure. Benson had been very kind, and when she was quite a little girl, and did not know any better, she had been satisfied with her; but Alice,

Digitized by Google

within the last few months, had learned that persons were to be valued for something beyond kindness; she had no respect for Benson, and without respect no love can be lasting. Besides, Benson had never ventured near the Manor since the day of the discovery in the east rooms, and Alice had accidentally heard the cook tell Marsham that she was gone away for some time; and even if she had been at Laneton, Alice would not have been tempted again to break Lady Catharine's commands, and meet her by stealth. It was a long hour that Alice stayed in the garden. She did not know whether Mr Clifford was still in the house, and she disliked seeing him. At length the glass door, which opened from the stone hall, was opened, and Lady Catharine appeared alone. She walked slowly up the path, stopping as she went to gather a few flowers, and to give an order to the gardener. Alice kept at a distance, waiting till some notice should be taken of her. Lady Catharine drew near, and whilst still examining some flowers, she said, coldly, 'Alice, you had better go in; Marsham wants you.'

Alice obeyed instantly, but she was chilled to the heart, and her eyes filled with tears. Marsham was impatient; she had been looking for her, and calling her, and her temper, which was none of the sweetest, was more than usually irritable. Alice's dress was taken off, and put aside in a box with several others, and a new one was put on. Alice was pleased at the change, though it made her angry to be pulled about roughly, and told to stand still, just as if she were a child of two years old. 'That is not the place for my frock, Marsham,' she said, pettishly, when the operation of dressing was over.

'Never you mind, Miss Alice; little girls should not ask questions, and give trouble.'

Alice knew that she had done neither the one nor the other, and she was provoked. 'But, Marsham, it never does go there, it is always kept in my bottom drawer; and if you don't put it there, I shall not know where to find it.'

'And much that will signify! Don't you trouble your head about it; I 'll take care fast enough.' Marsham looked mysterious, and, kneeling on the floor, began industriously filling the same trunk with more of Alice's things.

'But Marsham, indeed—what are you doing? I don't like my things touched,' exclaimed Alice, indignantly.

Another mysterious look was the answer: the work rapidly progressed, and in a short time the box was declared to be so

Digitized by Google

full that it would be necessary to call in assistance in order to make it shut. Alice stood watching what was going on; one minute asking a question, then venting her anger at receiving no answer; and gradually working herself up into a state of extreme irritation. Marsham, however, went on unheeding; the box was dragged into the passage, one of the men-servants was called to close it, the key was turned, and Marsham departed. At the same moment the bell rang, and Alice was summoned to tea. For the last two months she had been in the habit of taking it with Lady Catharine, and once she had enjoyed the half-hour and looked forward to it. Now, it was a silent meal; eating and drinking seemed the one thing to be thought of; and when this was over Alice was ordered to look out her music-books, and to fetch her workbox; and being supplied with needles, thread, pins, and other requisites for work, she was employed for some time in winding silk and filling a needle-book and pincushion; and was then ordered to carry her box up-stairs to Marsham. Alice's curiosity was becoming painful; yet she dared not ask a single question. She lingered to see what would be done with her box, but it was placed on the table and left. Marsham said 'Thank you,' as if she knew quite well why it was brought, and Alice was obliged to go down-stairs again. Afterwards followed the looking out of a few story-books. That was not a difficult task—she had not many, and there was no fear of their being hidden among the lesson-books, for the lesson-shelf was nearly empty. Slates, copy-books, desks, and papers, had disappeared. The school-room looked deserted. Perhaps Lady Catharine thought so, for she sighed as she gazed around, and her eyes glistened with tears; Alice's heart might be heavy, but there was one heart yet heavier. All the business was at length finished. It was clear to her now what was about to happen—she was going to school. But where? when? would it be the very next day? More than ever she longed to ask. It wanted half an hour to her bed-time, and she drew near the fire, opposite to Lady Catharine, hoping that now, at last, some information would be given her. Lady Catharine took out her watch, and stirring the fire to make a blaze, looked at it and again sighed. 'Eight o'clock! you had better go, Alice; there is a journey in store for you to-morrow, and you must be up early.' Alice rose to obey; she approached Lady Catharine to wish her good-night, expecting the cold, quiet kiss, which lately had been her only

Digitized by Google

mark of affection. But it was a strange kiss this night—long and fervent, even as the kiss of a mother's fondness; Lady Catharine's arm was thrown around her, and her hand was held with a trembling grasp. No word was spoken, but the God, 'who seeth the heart,' heard an earnest entreaty for His blessing upon a weak and sinful child; and when Alice had left the room, Lady Catharine Hyde buried her face in her hands, and gave vent to a sorrow which no human eye would have been permitted to witness.

Parting with those we love must of necessity be one of the great trials of human life. So many accidents, so many changes, may happen before we meet again; and there are very few who have faith enough to feel that there is an All-seeing eye, and an Almighty arm equally at hand to watch over and protect in their absence as in their presence. We fancy—who does not fancy?—that our friends are safest when with us. Even Mr Clifford, as he sat with his wife and children by the cheerful fire on the last evening which they were to spend together, experienced something of the same misgiving, though it was checked directly it was discovered. 'To-morrow!' said Ruth, and every one repeated to-morrow; and then there was a pause; Madeline's thoughts were in a stage-coach, Ruth's in the drawing-room of Mrs Carter's house, which she had already begun to picture to herself. Mrs Clifford rose from her seat, and walked rather quickly about the room, taking up boxes and portfolios to see if anything had been left behind. She had done so once or twice before; she had not really any fear; but a sudden restlessness had seized her: she longed for something to do.

'Dear mamma,' said Madeline, following her, 'can't I help you?'

'No, thank you, my love; I don't want anything,' and Mrs Clifford sat down again as suddenly as she had moved. Ruth was resting on a low stool, and her head was leaning against her father's knee. He passed his hand over her hair, but he did not speak for some time. At length he observed—

'Some one else is to say good-bye to Laneton to-morrow. Can you guess who?'

Madeline looked up hastily: 'Some one else, papa? a child, do you mean?'

'Yes, a child; some one you know.'

Madeline scarcely required to think. 'Alice,' she exclaimed, whilst her voice was husky, and her cheek became crimson.

Digitized by Google

'She is going to school also,' said Mr Clifford. There was a peculiar tone in his voice, which showed that he had serious thoughts in his mind.

'To Mrs Carter's?' asked Ruth, eagerly.

'Yes, to Mrs Carter's; you will have the same companion there as here.'

'Not the same, papa,' said Ruth; 'Madeline will never do so again.'

'We must hope not.' Mr Clifford had learned to speak doubtfully upon the probability of any person's goodness, much more upon that of one so unstable as Madeline.

'Is Alice to go with us?' asked Madeline, in an under-voice.

'No, she will travel alone with Lady Catharine. Alice goes to school for punishment.'

'I am sure Alice is very sorry for being naughty,' said Ruth.

'I trust and think she is. Lady Catharine thinks so, too; but Alice's faults will require much time to correct, and so will yours. Perhaps when you are together again you may all be led into mischief.'

'You are always afraid for us, papa,' said Ruth, whilst she drew her head up rather proudly.

'Fear is safe,' replied Mr Clifford; 'it teaches us to be on our guard. My great fear for you, Ruth, is, that you do not fear.'

'And for me, papa?' said Madeline.

'No, my love, I think you have learned to fear. Your danger is, that you will not think before you act; that you listen to every one who talks to you, and jump into a fault before you well know what you are doing. You say yes to everything in an instant.'

'And what is Alice's?' said Ruth.

'I do not know Alice as I do you, my dear child; perhaps she is wilful and determined; but we will not talk about her in that way.'

'You won't be afraid for us when we grow up,' said Ruth.

'Yes, more than I am now, unless you have made good use of your childhood, and have firm, strong characters.'

'I daresay we shall have, as we are going to school,' said Ruth; 'we shall be able to do like others more.'

'And what do you think these others will be like? will they all be good?'

Digitized by Google

'I don't know,' said Ruth, considering.

'I am sure they learn a great deal,' observed Madeline; 'Fanny Evans goes to school, and she writes French letters, and next year she is going to begin Italian.'

'And you can do—what?'

'Only French exercises—easy ones. I never tried to write a letter.'

'And Fanny Evans reads Grecian history, too, papa,' said Ruth; 'and she can say all the gods and goddesses, and the popes, and the French kings.'

'Very wise, indeed,' said Mr Clifford; 'I don't know what Mrs Carter will say to two such little ignoramuses as you.'

'Mamma wrote to Mrs Carter, and told her not to ask us hard questions,' said Madeline.

'I don't think I should very much mind being asked,' observed Ruth. 'You know Fanny Evans is eleven years old —eleven and a half now; and she has been at school three years, and Alice knows hardly anything about history; she will be much worse off.'

'Alice can say her English dates, though,' said Madeline; 'and I think Lady Catharine has taught her a good deal. But do you know, papa, she used to read "Jack and the Beanstalk" to Benson?'

The two children grew quite merry at the idea of such a lesson, and Madeline having somewhat recovered the sensation of shame, which had come over her upon the mention of Alice's name, declared she should like her being there of all things.

'But it is so odd for her not to set off with us,' said Ruth; 'shall we see her as we go along?'

'No, she will travel by a different road in a carriage.'

'And won't she sleep in our room, for us to talk to her?' said Madeline.

'When I went to school,' replied Mrs Clifford, 'no talking in rooms was allowed.'

'None, mamma, not a word? oh, how cruel!'

'Not at all like home!' exclaimed the children; and in an instant Mrs Carter's house assumed very much the aspect of a prison.

'But what shall we do? we can't undress without talking; it will be so very dull,' said Madeline.

'So very, very dull,' echoed Ruth. The bright smiles which, a few minutes before, had lighted up their faces, vanished; and

Digitized by Google

In their stead tears gathered in their eyes, notwithstanding their endeavours to check them.

'I did not think at all it would be so strict,' said Ruth.

'I thought it was to be just like home,' said Madeline.

'And that we might run in the garden, and read, and laugh, and do what we liked,' continued Ruth.

'Yes; all the same as we do now, Ruth, only have some others with us, and Mrs Carter to take care of us.'

'Please, papa, may we stay with you?' said Ruth, caressingly.

'Impossible, quite impossible!' and Mr Clifford shook his head. Ruth turned sadly away; after that word, impossible, she had never any hope of gaining her point.

'To-morrow,' she once more repeated, but there was more of melancholy in her voice than there had been before. 'Papa, we would be so very good if you would let us stay.'

'Ruth, my love, this is but a new fancy. School is not at all worse to-day than it was yesterday.'

'If we might only talk when we go to bed,' said Madeline, while the tears flowed down her cheek. Her mamma took her upon her lap, laughing at her being such a great baby.

'I never did like it,' said Ruth; 'I never said that I did. When I was told first, I could not bear it.'

'And, mamma, we shall not see you such a long, long time,' half whispered Madeline; and she turned her head aside whilst she played with her mamma's watch chain, vainly striving to recover her composure. Mrs Clifford felt as sorrowful at the thought as her little girl. 'Part of September, and October, and November, and a bit of December,' she said; 'not more than three months.'

It was but poor comfort, and Ruth's sigh was very deep. 'Well!' said Mr Clifford, 'perhaps after all, it is best not to try to be comforted. Three months must seem a long time, and school is not as pleasant as home, and we would none of us be parted if we could help it.'

Ruth looked up in his face. 'Do you really think so, papa?'

'Yes, really; I have not been so uncomfortable for a long time; I don't know what I might do if I were left to myself: cry too, perhaps, and poor mamma is worse than all, I suspect.' Madeline's lips were pressed to her mamma's cheek. A tear was resting on it, and Mrs Clifford smiled at being found out.

'And now that we have all confessed to being unhappy, sup-

Digitized by Google

pose we ring for candles, and go to tea,' continued Mr Clifford. Half of Ruth's grief had vanished when she saw that it was shared by others; and she busied herself in putting away the books. Madeline ran to fetch the keys; the fire was stirred; the candles were placed upon the table; the urn was brought in; and in a few minutes they were all seated around it, and school was again the subject of discussion. A merry one, however, for the children tried to forget the expected dulness of bed-time, and their mamma was appealed to with questions about her own school-days—questions which would always have been interesting, but now seemed really of consequence. Bed-time came at last, earlier than usual; for the same reason which Lady Catharine had given to Alice, there was a long journey in prospect the next day.

'They shall read to me to-night, I think,' said Mr Clifford to his wife, as the clock struck eight. 'There is no very great hurry, and it is the last night.'

Ruth had a most uncomfortable feeling in her throat, and Madeline's tears broke out afresh. 'Did you read at school, mamma?' she said in a broken voice.

'Yes, but alone in my own room, after we had prayers down-stairs.'

Ruth brought the book, but it was very difficult to find the place; something seemed to come across her eyes and blind them. She turned over the pages quickly. 'It is the 119th Psalm to-night, papa,' she said, as her father took the prayer-book from her.

'Suppose I were to read for you just this once.' The children drew near, an arm was thrown round each little waist, and their mamma turned aside from the light, and cried quietly. Ruth looked round, wishing her to come to the table, but Mr Clifford made a sign that she was not to be disturbed, and immediately began reading. There were but a few verses; short and very simple: telling of the blessedness of those that are 'undefiled in their way, and walk in the law of the Lord;' those that 'keep His testimonies, and seek Him with their whole heart.' A wish there was also, that God would direct the ways of His servants, and enable them to keep His statutes; and the promise of the thankfulness of 'an unfeigned heart,' when 'the judgments of His righteousness' should have been fully learned. Mr Clifford read the words slowly, and as he came to the end he said, 'The next portion too is beautiful; we may all learn something

Digitized by Google

from it to-night. It tells us how young men and the aged, how parents and little children, may cleanse their ways, and walk according to the law of their God.' Ruth and Madeline listened to their father's voice, and felt that it had seldom before sounded so solemn. '"My delight shall be in thy statutes, and I will not forget thy word;"' he repeated a second time, when the additional portion of the psalm was ended. 'That was the declaration of a wise and good man, and his blessedness also.'

'Do statutes mean laws?' asked Ruth.

'Yes; and it shows how good the person who wrote the psalm must have been, that he could venture to promise to the All-seeing God that he would take a delight in His laws. Generally speaking, persons do not take a delight in God's laws—they find them troublesome.'

'Do you take a delight in them, papa?' said Madeline.

'I hope I do, in a degree, my love; though not at all as I ought; but I should be very miserable without them.'

'Do you think we shall, some day?' said Ruth.

'Yes, indeed, I do: it is my greatest comfort when I think upon what your future life may be.'

'But what good will it do you, papa?' said Madeline.

'It will prove to me that you are in God's favour, the children of His love, and so I shall not be afraid of anything that may happen to you.'

Madeline sighed. 'It is very hard to be good, now,' she said.

'And not at all pleasant, sometimes,' continued Mr Clifford. 'But the doing must come first, and the pleasure will be certain to follow.'

'Now, whilst we are children,' inquired Ruth.

'Yes, if you are really in earnest. Even children can understand what a blessing it is to have a being to love them who is so powerful, that He made them as well as all the world; and to have a friend in God's blessed Son, who, by His death, has redeemed them and all mankind from the punishment of sin, and promised them great happiness in heaven: and even children, when they wish to be good, can feel what a help it is to know that they have some one always near, God the Holy Ghost, to sanctify or make them holy.'

'Who sanctifieth me and all the elect people of God,' repeated Madeline, for the words seemed to come quite naturally.

'Ah! if you could but remember that, my dear child,' said

Digitized by Google

Mrs Clifford, approaching the table. 'If you could learn to think of it now!'

'You would not mind our going to school, mamma,' whispered Ruth.

'Mind it—I should, because it would still be parting from you; but it would not be the same sort of minding.'

'It must not be so now,' said Mr Clifford; 'we must none of us doubt, and think that God will forget those whom He has elected or chosen to be His.'

'Oh! papa; how do we know?' and Ruth looked up in surprise.

'You forget the outward mark, Ruth.'

'Our baptism,' said Ruth, blushing.

'Yes, that is the sign of our being chosen, of our being numbered amongst God's elect now.'

'But hereafter'—began Mrs Clifford—she could not finish the sentence. Her husband looked at her tenderly.

'We will trust for the hereafter,' he said, 'to Him who has so blessed us at the present. He who took our darlings to be His own, when we offered them to Him at their baptism, will surely, if we all pray to Him, sanctify their hearts and guard them from sin, whatever temptations may assail them.'

'But if we are chosen, there is no fear,' said Ruth.

'The Israelites were chosen,' replied Mr Clifford; 'they are constantly called God's chosen people; yet of all those who were taken from bondage in Egypt, and who passed through the Red Sea, which is the type or figure of Christian baptism, but only a very few, we know, entered the promised land.'

'The others died,' said Ruth, in a serious voice. Though she had read the account so often, it seemed as if she had never thought much of it before.

'Yes, in the wilderness,' replied her father, 'and their history is written for our example. Yet the fact of having been chosen is a cause for great thankfulness; it gives us hope, and especially when we have reason to believe that the Holy Spirit is really sanctifying or making us holy, that we are obtaining the victory over our sinful tempers.'

'If we are not,' began Ruth.

'If we are not, there is great cause for fear. It is as if the child of a great prince were to despise his blessings, and neglect his duties, and, leaving his father's home, were to dwell

Digitized by Google

amongst persons who were ignorant and vile, till at length he became like them.'

'But we are not princesses,' said Madeline.

'Not on earth, not to the eyes of men, but we are something far greater—we have been numbered amongst the elect people of God; and if we continue steadfast to the end, there is a crown awaiting us in heaven, so bright and so lasting, that the first of earthly monarchs might well give up all for its possession.'

'They think you are speaking from fancy,' said Mrs Clifford.

'Nay,' replied her husband, and a smile of happiness and hope passed over his features, 'I am speaking really—of that which I believe and know—for it is written in the Word of God. And even now, if their eyes were opened, and they could see all that is really passing around them, they would surely find themselves walking in the midst of angels and in the presence of God, and guarded and loved with a love as much greater than yours and mine as the God of heaven is superior to a sinful human being. They are God's children,' he continued, 'and whilst they remember this they are safe.'

'Ah! whilst they remember,' repeated Mrs Clifford, anxiously.

Her husband smiled cheerfully, and as he kissed his little girls, and pressed them fondly to his heart, he said, 'Yes, to learn to remember is for us all the great business of life.' The children lingered still, but the conversation was ended, and they were obliged to go. What had been said, however, was not forgotten, for as they laid their heads upon their pillow, Ruth said to Madeline, 'We will try and remember, Madeline—won't we?'

CHAPTER XVII.

IS there any time in the year more pleasant than a bright morning in early autumn, when the air is soft, yet bracing, and the leaves are only just beginning to change, and white clouds flit rapidly across a blue sky, and as we wake from our comfortable sleep with a feeling of health, and open our window to look out upon the beauty which God has spread out for our enjoyment, our minds, as well as our bodies, seem strengthened, and we are able to look forward without fear to the business or the trial of the day? Madeline and her sister could not have

Digitized by Google

told why it was that leaving home seemed so much less sad the next morning, but they felt that it was so. They had thoughts of cheerfulness rather than of melancholy, when Martha called them and told them to dress quickly, that they might be in time for the coach; and the sight of their trunks and baskets, and all the preparations for their journey, was rather a pleasure than not. They dwelt less upon the home they were to leave than upon the new places they were about to visit. 'I don't care about going in the coach to Cottington,' said Madeline, who, according to her usual custom, stood wasting her time at the window, 'but what I shall like will be the railroad.'

'And London,' added Ruth, 'beautiful London; and all the shops. Mamma says we shall be two hours there before we have to go to Mrs Carter's.'

'It is so odd about Alice,' said Madeline; 'I can't think why she doesn't go with us. It seems, somehow, as if she was a prisoner, doesn't it?'

'It does not signify what she seems like now,' replied Ruth; 'we have no time for thinking about her. If you stand dawdling in that way, Madeline, you will be too late.

'Too late!' repeated Madeline, slowly. She stopped to consider for an instant, and then, as if the words had given her a new power of exerting herself, began to dress quickly.

Mrs Clifford came in to help them. Martha corded the boxes, the gardener was called in to carry them down-stairs, and then the two children were told to go to breakfast. It was quite a grand breakfast for them—cold meat, and eggs, and dry toast—and they might eat what they liked; but, on this first day of their having such a permission, their appetites were gone; they wanted nothing. Dressing had made them feel differently. They had a very unpleasant sensation at their hearts, and when Mr Clifford said that he fancied he heard the coach, Ruth felt as if she should be choked. There might have been some cause for this in the alteration in their mamma's countenance, for Mrs Clifford was pale, and there was a dark, heavy shade around her eyes, as if she had not slept well. There was a quivering, too, every now and then, about her lips; and when she tried to cut some bread and butter, her hand shook. Every one seemed unhappy, except, perhaps, Mr Clifford. He appeared more cheerful than usual; but, when he had said something to make the children laugh, he would leave off suddenly, and put down his knife and fork, and walk away

Digitized by Google

to the window. That was very unlike his usual manner, certainly, but Ruth thought that he might be trying to become grave again.

'The coach, sir,' said Martha, opening the door.

Mr Clifford rose immediately: 'Come, my loves, there is no time to lose; if you want anything more, you must take a biscuit with you.'

'I have quite finished, papa,' said Madeline, struggling in vain to retain her tears. Ruth pushed her plate away, but sat still, gazing fixedly before her.

'Ruth—my dear child—pray—indeed, you must be quick,' exclaimed Mrs Clifford.

At the sound of her mamma's voice Ruth started. 'Yes, I know—Madeline, shall I bring'—— but before the sentence was finished, Ruth burst into tears, and throwing her arms round her neck, sobbed aloud. Mrs Clifford felt it was no time for giving way to grief, and gently disengaging herself, she said—

'This is not like you, my own Ruth; I thought we were all to try to show self-command?'

Ruth's pride was touched; she made a great effort to subdue her distress, and, without venturing again to speak, ran to fetch her bonnet. Madeline went with her, and the first burst of sorrow was checked by the necessary parting instructions as to the boxes and the frocks, and the parcel to be given to Mrs Carter, and, above all, by the injunctions to write often, and say everything that came into their heads. The coachman was looking impatient, and muttering a prophecy that they should be too late for the train. 'Once more, dear, dear mamma,' said Ruth, and she held up her face for the last kiss. Madeline held her mother's hand so tight that it became almost pain.

'We will think of the day after to-morrow,' said Mr Clifford, as he hurried the children into the coach, and then returned to to take his own farewell. Mrs Clifford did not try to say good-bye; her eyes were dimmed with tears, but she stood at the door, and gazed at the two little faces which peeped from the window, and, when the corner of the village street was turned, she still strained her sight to catch a glimpse of the heavily-laden coach, as it slowly wound its way up the steep hill of Laneton. At length, however, even that distant view was denied her, and she was compelled to return to her ordinary

Digitized by Google

duties, with a heavy heart, but with full trust that God had heard her prayers, and would guard her husband and her children from all evil.

The day closed in drearily, the sky became overcast with clouds, the wind moaned amongst the trees, and from time to time drifted to the ground the few faded leaves which already began to give warning of the coming winter. It was an autumn evening; always rather mournful, but in some places more so than in others. In London and its neighbourhood, many things unite to make it particularly dull to strangers, who have no old friends and cheerful firesides to welcome them. Mrs Carter's school-room might have been thought dull by many. It looked out into a garden, a large one for London, or rather for the environs of London. There was a smooth piece of turf in front of the window, marked by many brown patches amongst a few of green, which had lately sprung up by the help of a refreshing rain. A fine beech-tree grew in the centre, around which was nailed a boarded seat; and some trim flower-beds, with a tolerably fair show of dahlias and chrysanthemums, bordered the neat gravel walks. It was a very pretty garden for London, and a very pleasant play-ground for Mrs Carter's school; and the little troop of girls, who were amusing themselves in it for the spare half hour before tea, cared nothing for the cloudy sky, or the moaning wind, and had no thought to give to the brown turf. Their own homes might be prettier, but they were very happy where they were; and what with the occupation of learning, and the pleasure of playing, there was but little time left for regrets. School to them was not at all an unhappy place, but a child, situated like Alice Lennox, who looked for the first time upon the high walls, the roofs of the surrounding houses, and the dusky sky with the streaks of orange and red, shining dingily through the smoke of London, would probably have been filled with melancholy thoughts, and have found little to please in the tree, the walk, or the flower-beds, or even in the voices of laughter which from time to time rang merrily in the air. Alice had passed a day of fatigue and annoyance, travelling the greater part of the time in Lady Catharine's chariot, without speaking or being spoken to; and (except when the horses were changed) stopping only once, for about a couple of hours, at the house of a lady whom Lady Catharine was desirous of seeing. The early part of the journey was agreeable enough; for Alice, like

Digitized by Google

Madeline and Ruth, felt the enjoyment of the lovely weather, and found an interest in the country and the towns through which she passed, which is denied to a traveller on a railroad; but she could not forget that she was seated by Lady Catharine's side, and that she was going to school because she had not behaved well at home. Where the school was to be, even then Alice did not know. She had asked Marsham, but had obtained no answer; and though a hope lingered in her mind that it might be Mrs Carter's, and that she might again meet Madeline and Ruth, there was also a fear that it might be in some distant place, far away from all she loved, where she should be kept with strictness, or even severity. This seemed to her the most natural idea, for if she was really going to Mrs Carter's, why was she not told at once? Half her fear would be over then, and she did not believe that Lady Catharine wished to torment her. If any comfort were to be had from knowing where her future residence was to be, she thought that she should have been told long before. Alice did not know that this silence was part of Lady Catharine's punishment. It was considered right that her going to school should be made as serious a thing as possible, in order to produce a due effect on her mind. Lady Catharine judged rightly, that when Alice knew she was to be in Mrs Carter's house, and to have Madeline and Ruth for her companions, the change, instead of being a punishment, would almost appear a pleasure. For this reason it was that the journey was silent and gloomy. Lady Catharine told the names of the towns, and once or twice pointed out some particular places, a gentleman's house, or a spot celebrated in history, but she said scarcely anything besides; and when they rested in the middle of the day, Alice spent the two hours by herself, with no employment but that of eating her luncheon, whilst Lady Catharine and her friend were engaged in conversation. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when they again resumed their journey, through rather a pretty country; and Alice, pleased at having something more to amuse her, felt her spirits rise in consequence. After all, she might be going to Mrs Carter's; and at the thought her curiosity rose to such a pitch, that she actually turned round to ask the question. But she could not put it into words; there was that in Lady Catharine's face which repelled her. She was reading also, and it would be against her especial order to interrupt her; so Alice once more looked out for the milestones, which were her greatest

Digitized by Google

comfort, as they told her that she was at least on the road to London, and thus gave her the greatest probability of being finally deposited at the wished-for door. By degrees the beauty of the day passed off, and the loveliness of the country seemed to be passing also. There were more houses—regular rows, with straight bits of garden, consisting of a strip of turf, and a narrow border of flowers, and a line of pavement leading up to each door. Occasionally a large red brick mansion, surrounded by a very high wall, stood back in melancholy grandeur from the road, apparently too proud to associate with its neighbours. Then came an inn, with the sign of the Black Horse, or the Blue Boar, or the Golden Lion, and a long list of all the conveniences which might be obtained by any one who chose to stop there. To this, perhaps, succeeded an open space—a village green, as it had once been called; the grass worn away by the hundreds of footsteps which were daily in the habit of crossing it; and a few posts and railings, showing that there was a desire on the part of the neighbourhood to protect it, if possible, from further injury. Now and then, too, it seemed as if they had reached a regular town, for there were paved streets, and good shops, and a certain appearance of bustle; but after passing two or three of these places, Alice did not again find herself in the country; rather the rows of houses were more frequent, the gardens smaller, and the village greens more rare; till at length the open country was quite gone, and dingy dwellings, and dust-covered trees, met her eye the whole length of the road. 'It must be London,' thought Alice, but it was not the London she had fancied; it was not so grand. A few minutes afterwards, a heavy, rumbling sound was heard, louder than the noise of the carriage, louder even than that of the stage-coach, which Alice had daily heard as it passed through the village of Laneton. She put her head as far as she dared out of the window, and saw rapidly approaching, a huge, unwieldy vehicle, neither like a coach, nor a carriage, nor a cart, nor anything that she had ever seen before, except perhaps the Cottington van. It was long and narrow, of a bright yellow colour, with 'Victoria,' painted in large letters upon the outside. There were several narrow windows down the side, and as it drew near Alice perceived that it was filled with people. On the outside also there were some passengers, and the driver's narrow seat was half-occupied by a dirty-looking man, smoking a cigar, whilst on the step behind stood another man, holding on by a strap, and

Digitized by Google

making signs to the people, and calling out to them as he passed along. Alice felt frightened as it drew near, especially when she saw two others behind, and several smaller carriages, some like gigs with heads to them, and others like little flys and chariots crowding up the road.

'That is an omnibus, Alice,' said Lady Catharine as the yellow van rolled by them; 'and now we are near London.'

Alice felt her heart throb with pleasure, but she merely said, 'Is it?' And then her head was again thrust out of the window, to watch everything that went by. There was much to amuse, for the number of carriages and people increased. Alice felt more than ever an anxiety to know where she was going. If all these things were to be seen from Mrs Carter's house, or from any house, it could not be dull. Lady Catharine's eye was upon her; she was watching her attentively; but she did not allow Alice to perceive it; and the same silence was observed as before.

'Are we in London, now?' Alice ventured at length to ask.

'No, we are not going there.'

Alice was grievously disappointed, yet a little consideration gave her fresh hope. Mrs Carter's house was not in London, only near it. The carriage advanced, but more slowly. The postilion looked about him, apparently uncertain how to proceed, and twice he turned quite round. Lady Catharine laid her hand upon the check-string ready to give her orders. A house standing back from the road was seen on the left-hand side. It was of red brick, and rather large, with stone facings to the windows, and more ornamented than modern houses. There were some trees at the back and at the sides, and a gravel sweep in front, entered by two gates, and altogether it was a very respectable-looking place: rather sombre, but still with a considerable air of comfort about it. At the first gate the check-string was pulled, the carriage stopped, the footman dismounted, and in another instant they drove up to the door of the red house. Alice's colour went and came, and her heart beat rapidly. The loud pealing bell and the thundering knock were answered by a staid, neat-looking woman, who, without waiting for any inquiries, drew back for Lady Catharine to enter; she then called to a fellow-servant to assist in unpacking the carriage, and led the way herself up a short flight of steps, and opening a door at the end of a broad passage, which might have been termed a lobby, showed a small study, nicely fur-

Digitized by Google

nished, and provided with a bright fire and plenty of books, where she begged that the ladies would rest themselves, whilst she went to inform her mistress of their arrival. Alice seated herself directly, but Lady Catharine, contrary to her usual mood, was restless, and paced the room with uneven steps. 'Is this Mrs Carter's?' was the question which again rose to Alice's lips, but again also it was checked. Her awe of Lady Catharine had within the last few hours become almost dread. The books before her might perhaps give her some information, and whilst Lady Catharine stood at the window, from which nothing was to be seen but a back court, Alice ventured to take one in her hand, hoping to see a name in it. She had not opened it when a footstep was heard, and as Alice replaced the book on the table, Lady Catharine Hyde stepped forward to greet the lady who entered the apartment. She was a tall, elderly person, with a countenance which in her youth it was easy to believe might have been decidedly handsome; for there was still something more than commonly pleasing in her very benevolent mouth, finely formed nose, and bright good-natured eye. Her forehead was high, and across it her hair was simply braided. She wore a dark silk dress, made not unfashionably, yet with a certain peculiarity from its extreme neatness, which, added to her plain cap, and handsome drab-coloured shawl, made her appear rather unlike other persons. Yet Alice felt directly that she was not as awful as Lady Catharine. A few words of greeting were interchanged, and the lady kissed Alice, and called her by her name, as if well acquainted with her. Alice listened eagerly to hear hers in return, but it was not mentioned: the conversation turned upon the weather, and the journey; and, after a short time, Lady Catharine begged that she might have a private conversation. 'Perhaps Alice will like to go to her companions,' she added. Alice thought she should like it, and the lady told her to follow her. They passed through a high, dark passage, at the end of which was an ante-room, containing some book-cases, and desks, and benches covered with green baize; and within this was another larger room, furnished much in the same style, and with windows opening upon the garden already described.

'This is the school-room, Alice,' said the lady. 'I hope you will soon be quite at home here.' Alice was going to reply, when the same servant who had opened the door came into the room, and begged to speak to her mistress. The lady turned

Digitized by Google

to Alice: 'Will you wait one moment for me, my dear? I shall be with you again immediately, I hope.'

Alice could not object, and she was left alone. The window at first afforded her sufficient amusement. Twelve girls of different ages, varying from ten to fifteen, were grouped in different parts of the garden; some strolling about arm in arm; others running along the walk at play; a few, with spades and rakes, gardening; and one, with a book in her hand, apparently learning her lesson. They were Alice's future companions, and she gazed upon them with an interest unlike that which she had ever felt for any other girls. But they were strangers, they did not know or care for her, and, perhaps, when they had heard her story, and were told that she was sent to school in disgrace, they might despise her. Alice was angry with them at the very idea, and her interest turned to indignation, and then into sorrow. She was so lonely, so very lonely; she despaired of seeing Madeline and Ruth; she was sure the strange lady was not Mrs Carter; the room was gloomy, the garden without beauty and, if she was never to see anything beyond, she might as well be kept in prison. Her heart became very heavy, and her memory wandered back to the white house, and the happy hours she had spent there with her dear mamma. If she were living it would have been different; no one then could have behaved harshly to her, and sent her to school against her will; and there would have been some one to love her, which she tried to believe Lady Catharine did not. Alice tried to believe it, but she did not do so really. All the kindness—even fondness—which had been shown her before her disobedience was discovered, proved the contrary. Desolate and unhappy though she was, and angry with every one about her, Alice knew that the cause of all lay in herself; she had not used her advantages properly, and now they were taken from her; and who was to blame? The trial of self-reproach is very hard to bear, and though Alice did not condemn herself as others might have done, she yet had nothing to look back upon with comfort when she remembered the steps by which she had brought herself into her present position. The first little wish, the first yielding to a slight temptation, the continued deceit, and then the falsehood—that was the shame. If Lady Catharine had told, her character was marked. Perhaps the children in the garden knew it; perhaps they saw her, and did not wish to speak to her. If they did not observe her,

Digitized by Google

Alice might have recollected that there was One who did; and she might have wondered how it was that the idea of the contempt of a fellow-creature should be so much more dreadful to bear than the certainty of the wrath of God. Alice did not cry, she was too proud; she did not choose that any one should observe how wretched she was; but she pushed her chair back from the window, so that she might not be seen, and, fixing her eyes upon the opposite wall, which was hung with large maps, awaited the return of the lady whom she rightly supposed was to be her future governess. The waiting was longer than she had expected; it was growing dusk, and she heard the children in the garden declare that they must go in. Alice dreaded their approach; she could not think what she should say to them. They did not, however, run in suddenly through the window, as she had feared, but, one by one, disappeared through a door, and directly afterwards she heard their cheerful voices as they went up-stairs to take off their bonnets. The time became now very long, for every one appeared to have forgotten her. She had heard a knock and ring at the front door, and there had been a little movement in a distant part of the house. Could Lady Catharine be departing without saying good-bye? It would be too cruel. Alice even thought she must go and see; but she did not know her way, and the darkness was increasing, and perhaps she should meet some one—a servant or one of the girls. No, it was better to remain patiently where she was, however uncomfortable she might be. There was a sound of laughter outside the room; they were coming certainly—the strange girls. Alice shrank back into her corner, and, a few moments afterwards, a little troop of them entered. They did not notice her; and, to her consternation, some of them began talking about her, wondering what she was like, what class she would be put into, and whether she would be as nice a girl as one who was just gone. 'No, no,' was the general exclamation; 'she can't be that—no one can be like Adelaide.'

'I shan't care about her,' said one.

'I don't think I shall much fancy her,' said another.

'I don't think Alices are ever good for much,' said a third; 'there was Alice Horner—what a tease she was!'

Alice Lennox felt ready to sink to the ground as she listened. She did not see that they were speaking without thought, from a mere prejudice; and her conscience whispered that, if they

Digitized by Google

did not expect to like her, they must have quite sufficient cause. 'Dawson, where is Dawson? why does not she bring candles?' suggested one more steady than the rest. The mention of candles recalled the wandering attention of all, and immediately there commenced a discussion of the different lessons; what had been done, and what remained to do, and whether it was worth while to begin anything before tea. Alice thought she heard the name of Mrs Carter; but the hubbub of voices prevented her from clearly distinguishing. 'Come, young ladies, the table must be cleared,' exclaimed a rather authoritative voice; and the same sombre-looking person, whom Alice had before seen, appeared with a tray, on which were placed four candles. The sudden light discovered the unsuspected inmate of the room; and, with a look of confusion, all stood motionless and silent. Alice did not dare advance; she believed that the girls looked upon her with contempt; and they, on their part, felt shocked at the observations which must have been overheard; they did not venture to be civil, and the pause which ensued was most awkward; so awkward that Alice could not bear it, and burst into tears. 'What shall we do? pray speak—say something; we are very sorry,' was whispered around. 'Hush! hark! Mrs Carter is coming,' said a ladylike, dark-haired girl, the eldest of the party. They turned to the door with a feeling of great relief: Mrs Carter was the only person who could help them out of their difficulty. The dark-haired girl advanced to meet her, but drew back; Mrs Carter entered the room, but not alone. Lady Catharine Hyde preceded her, and behind her came a gentleman and two little girls. Alice saw them, and sprang forwards: 'Madeline!' 'Ruth!' 'Alice!' were the mutual exclamations; and in the delight of the meeting the dread of strangers was unfelt. 'It is Mrs Carter's school, Alice,' said Lady Catharine, in a tone of the deepest tenderness. 'God grant you may be good and happy here!' Alice's spirit was subdued; she was too satisfied at finding her doubts relieved to be proud, and looking up into Lady Catharine's face, whilst she pointed to the girls who were standing round the table, she said, in a low voice, 'Don't they all know about it?'

'No one knows, my love,' replied Lady Catharine, drawing her aside, 'except Mrs Carter: you have a new life before you, Alice; shall it be like the past?' Alice's voice failed her as she strove to answer; but the heartiness with which she re-

Digitized by Google

turned Lady Catharine's kiss showed how sincerely, at that moment, she desired to amend.

'They will be friends soon,' said Mrs Carter, kindly, observing the shy glances which passed on both sides between the new acquaintances. The dark-haired girl once more ventured to approach, and taking Alice's hand, she said—'It was so foolish just now, we did not know you were there; I hope you don't think we meant it.' Alice's shyness had vanished in the presence of her former playfellows; and, though still retaining some doubts, her smile proved that she did not mean to be unforgiving: she looked round for Ruth and Madeline, feeling that from having arrived first she had a sort of right to introduce them. They were standing by their papa, grasping his hands, as if afraid he would escape. 'My darlings, I must go,' he whispered.

'Not yet, surely, not yet,' said Mrs Carter, overhearing the last words; 'tea is just ready.'

'I am afraid it cannot be; and Lady Catharine has kindly offered to take me back to town in her carriage.'

Mrs Carter looked disappointed, and said that she had calculated upon their company for the whole evening. Madeline's eyes were raised with an eager petition of entreaty, but Ruth could not look up. The sorrow, which the amusement of the journey had diverted, was gathered together for the parting hour. Mr Clifford stooped to kiss them, and bless them with a father's blessing. What he said was short and simple, but the thoughts which were in his heart were deep and unutterable. He was leaving his children weak, sinful, and ignorant; what had he not to fear? but he was leaving also 'the members of Christ, the children of God, the inheritors of the kingdom of heaven;' wherefore should he not trust?

'It will be Christmas soon, papa, won't it?' said Madeline. Mr Clifford assured her that the time would pass more rapidly than she could at all imagine. 'And that will be a happy meeting for us all, we hope,' observed Lady Catharine, as she approached with Alice. Mr Clifford held out his hand to Alice, and said a few affectionate words, which satisfied her completely. He had never looked or spoken thus since the day of his unsuccessful conversation, and she felt now that he had forgiven her.

'To-morrow, even, will be a happier day than this,' said Mrs Carter, as she observed the distress which Mr Clifford could not entirely conceal.

Digitized by Google

'Worse for me,' he replied, half laughing: 'but I have no fears for them. And now, good-bye.' He withdrew his hand forcibly from Ruth's, once more pressed his lips to his children's foreheads, and, not daring to trust himself with another look, hastened from the room.

Lady Catharine saw that the dreaded moment of separation was come. 'My own Alice! my precious child!' she said, 'I must not stay.'

It was all but a mother's affection which spoke, and Alice felt how truly Lady Catharine was her friend. There was a bitter pang of self-reproach in her heart, as she whispered, 'Can you forgive it all?'

'Forgive! fully, entirely, as if it had never been,' was the reply; 'only let me hear that you are trying to do right.' Alice threw her arms around Lady Catharine's neck, received one long kiss, and they parted.

Mrs Carter followed Lady Catharine and Mr Clifford. The door was closed, and three children were left to the society of their new friends, and the commencement of their school life.

PART II.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SUNDAY in London and at school! It has not a very cheerful sound. Sunday seems a day especially meant for home, and pleasant country walks, and churches where there are as many poor people as rich. We should not like to see the shops open and business going on, but still it is rather dull to look upon closed windows; and when persons drive by in their carriages we are apt to say that they had better give rest to their horses and servants; and if the streets are silent, we think that it is gloomy and unnatural. So at least it is to persons who have not been much in London. Sunday makes them long for the country more than any other day; but after a time, if God has so ordered it that we should live there, our feelings become very

Digitized by Google

different; then we see that wherever there are churches and clergymen there also is a home; and when we kneel down to pray in the crowded congregations, it is as pleasant to think of the hundreds and hundreds who are praying with us, using the very same words in the churches close at hand, as it would be to look through the window of a little country church into the deep blue sky and be reminded that the holy angels perhaps are leaving their glorious worlds to join with us, sinners though we are, in worshipping and praising God. A holy and a thankful heart can be holy and thankful everywhere. And so in the difference between school and home. Habit, and a good, obedient, cheerful temper, will enable us to find happiness under all circumstances; and when Ruth Clifford sat down to her desk in the back school-room, one warm sunny afternoon, after the morning service and an early dinner, the recollection of home, instead of making her sad, only gave her a thrill of joy as she thought how delightful it would be, when the holidays came, to return there.

Ruth was altered since we last knew her; she was nearly three years older; taller, therefore, less like a child in face and figure; less shy, and more inclined to give her opinion. Her voice was still very quiet and her manner very gentle, but children of her own age were a little afraid of her—that is, when they had done anything wrong; and girls older than herself respected her, and allowed her to be with them, and even sometimes consulted her. Twins though they were, it was difficult to believe that Ruth and Madeline were of the same age, and still more difficult to believe that Alice was the eldest of the three. Ruth sat by herself this afternoon, her head leaning upon her hand, a copy-book before her, and a Bible with references by her side. It was open at the twentieth chapter of Exodus. She was going to find out all the passages in which anything is said of the giving of the Ten Commandments to the Israelites after they were brought out of Egypt, the land of bondage. Ruth was fond of finding out texts, and especially she liked writing them out neatly. Her copy-book was considered the pattern one of the school—no blots, no mistakes, and the handwriting particularly free, and yet easily to be read. Madeline had the same task, and Alice and one or two others about their age. Madeline's desk was the opposite one to Ruth's, but in the same set; there were four together. The sisters had never been separated since they first came to school,

Digitized by Google

Once it was proposed that they should be, but Madeline cried and Ruth looked unhappy, and Mrs Carter did not insist upon it. Now that they were thrown more into the world, the precious tie of sisterhood was become dearer to them than ever. Madeline's reverence for Ruth had increased. This was very natural when even the elder girls took notice of her, and thought much of her cleverness and good conduct. Madeline's mind was rather wandering this afternoon. It takes a long time to cure a habit of inattention. She turned round on her stool and put her hand upon the shoulder of Alice, who was seated just behind her, and said—

'Alice, do come and help me if you have finished.'

'But I have not, I have a good many more to find,' replied Alice, without looking up.

Madeline went to peep over Alice's shoulder.

'Alice, I do think you have a good fit this afternoon.'

'That 's more than you have, Maddy,' said a sharp voice.

Madeline laughed. The speaker was a keen, black-eyed, shrewd girl, apparently older than Madeline, who was one of the four occupants of Alice's set of desks.

'What makes you work so hard, Alice?' continued Madeline; 'we are not to show our books till the evening.' Alice still went on. 'Then I must come to you, Clara;' and Madeline went round to the other side. 'I want some one to tell me how many verses we have to write of this chapter.'

'You may find out that without peeping,' said Clara Manners, closing her book.

Madeline seemed disconcerted. Just then a sigh was heard, and Clara's nearest neighbour, a sickly, flaxen-haired little girl, but with something old and melancholy in her face, said, in a subdued voice, 'I would help you, Madeline, if I could, but I can't do my own.'

'Can't you?' replied Madeline, good-naturedly. 'What is the matter?'

She sat down on the half of the stool, Janet Harding moving to make room for her. 'I am so slow in writing, Maddy, I shall never have finished.'

'Never! that is a very long day; let me see'—and Madeline took the pen from Janet's hand. 'How you jog!' exclaimed Clara, impatiently, and Alice raised her eyes as if disturbed; but Madeline was too pleased to be helping any one out of a difficulty to attend to them. She wrote all that Janet wished,

Digitized by Google

and assisted in finding out the other references, showing plainly that her own question had been an idle one.

'That is very kind,' said Janet, when Madeline laid down the pen—'no one would have helped me except you.'

'No one! O Janet! you will not say so when you have been here longer.'

'But I shall—do you know, Maddy, I think school is just like the house of bondage that Mrs Carter was telling us about before she sent us in to write our texts.'

'I never, in my life, knew any one with such strange notions as Janet Harding,' exclaimed Clara, pushing aside her copy-book, and speaking so loudly as to attract general notice. 'Ruth, what do you think she says? She declares that school is the house of bondage.'

'Like it,' observed Janet, quickly; 'and it is like it, is it not, Ruth? because we have such hard tasks.'

Ruth listened with rather an air of satisfaction, perhaps from finding herself appealed to as an authority, and then answered in her soft, sweet voice, that she did not think Mrs Carter intended it to be a house of bondage, and that it was quite necessary to do tasks, because if they did not, they should all be ignorant when they grew up.

'That is all very well for Ruth to say,' continued Janet, returning to Madeline as her only hope of support, 'because she is clever; but, you know, I am not at all clever.'

'O Janet! how foolish! why you can do just as well as any of us when you try; you don't write as quickly, that is all.'

Janet put on a disconsolate air, and answered, 'I should like to know what a house of bondage is, if it is not school. My aunt said, I should hate school, and I do.'

Just then the door opened, and several girls who had been reading with Mrs Carter came in, and seating themselves at the long table, began to talk over what they had been doing. This interrupted the former conversation, and, for a time, heads were again bent down, and pens busy. Silence at the desks was first broken by Alice, who, pushing back her stool, and shutting her copy-book, exclaimed triumphantly, 'There, I have done now; I don't care what happens to any one.'

'Kind—I must say,' observed Clara; 'and what a pace you must have written at, Alice! Why, you have finished before Ruth.'

'Oh! because Ruth is so slow and neat. I never could take

Digitized by Google

the trouble she does. Who would like a piece of cake?' And as she spoke, Alice lifted up the lid of her desk, and took out half a plum-cake. A little party gathered round her, and a good deal of laughing and talking went on, which made one or two who were graver or more busy cry 'Hush!' and induced even Ruth to look up from her occupation.

Madeline was still engaged with Janet Harding, asking her the questions which Mrs Carter was likely to put when the tasks were shown; but she could not refrain from joining occasionally in the merriment, and with the Bible before her, and in the act of listening to very serious words, she did not hesitate to talk, as she would have done under ordinary circumstances. The mirth served only to increase Janet's melancholy, and, in a reproachful tone, she said, 'You are all happy but me, Madeline.'

'Don't fret, Janet, dear; you will be happy too, by and by,' was Madeline's answer, and then she stretched out her hand for some more cake, and was as much amused as before. Janet sighed, and said no more.

All this time Ruth had continued writing steadily, scarcely raising her eyes, and only speaking when she was spoken to; but now coming round to Madeline, she said, 'Cannot I help Janet, and you go and finish your own texts, Maddy?'

Madeline coloured, for there was something of a reproof in Ruth's tone. She left Janet, and sat down again to her own desk.

'Now, Janet, what is it? where are you?' asked Ruth.

Janet pointed to the place. There was a blot, just where Madeline had left off writing, at which Ruth's neat eye was offended. 'You should learn to write for yourself, Janet,' she said, 'and then you might take care for yourself. How could Madeline be so stupid!'

Janet was abashed; her sorrowful eyes grew more sorrowful, and a tear dropped upon the page of her book.

'Out! out! all directly,' cried a merry young voice; 'we are to go into the garden for half an hour, and we'll have to show our texts before tea, because Mrs Carter and Miss Barnard don't like having them after evening service.'

'Tiresome! tormenting!' exclaimed Clara, Alice, and a few others; and little Jessie O'Neile was required to repeat the order a second time.

'What made Mrs Carter say that, Jessie?' asked Clara.

Digitized by Google

'I don't know; but Miss Barnard declared there had been plenty of time for the texts.'

'Miss Barnard is—so,' said Clara, crossing her fingers.

Janet Harding gave a glance of astonishment, and Ruth said, 'For shame!' but others, who were near, laughed. One of the elder girls, however, came up, and, in an authoritative voice, ordered the books to be put away. Madeline was the last to obey. She was scribbling; not writing merely, but scribbling—as fast as her fingers could move, making great blunders and not a few blots.

'Dear Ruth!' she said, looking up piteously at her sister as she was leaving the room. Ruth returned directly, but decided that it was impossible to finish them. Mrs Carter would be angry if they did not go out directly.

'What shall I do? Dear me! there is another blot—do some one give me a bit of blotting paper.'

Only one inmate of the room remained besides the sisters. This was a very lady-like girl, apparently between fifteen and sixteen years of age. Some may perhaps remember to have heard of her before, when Alice made her first unhappy appearance at Mrs Carter's, and one of the little party offered an apology to her for the rest. Then Mary Vernon was the eldest in the room; now she was the eldest in the school, and the object of respect, of admiration, and, to some, of envy. She was an only child, the heiress of a large fortune, idolised by her father, petted by the aunt who supplied a mother's place to her, and just about to leave school. Who could be happy if Mary Vernon was not? Madeline seldom came in Mary's way, and considered her as a grown-up young lady, very far superior to herself, but Ruth had lately become more intimate with her, for, as was before said, Ruth was often admitted now to be with those older than herself; and frequently on a Saturday afternoon, when they sat together at work in different parties, whilst one read aloud for the amusement of the rest, Ruth would leave her own seat and beg to be allowed to stay with the 'old girls,' as they were generally called, professing to like their grave books much better than lighter ones. In many ways Mary had been kind to Ruth—to whom indeed was she not kind?—and seeing now that both the sisters were uncomfortable, she went up to ask what was the matter. Madeline pointed to her text-book, scribbled and dirty, and most unfit for Mrs Carter's inspection. What was to be done?

Digitized by Google

'Nothing,' so Mary and Ruth agreed—'nothing but to go out as quickly as possible, and when the books were shown to own the truth without attempting an excuse.'

'I never will help others, I declare,' exclaimed Madeline. 'I always get into disgrace when I do.'

Something of an arch smile stole over Mary's face, as if she could have given some good advice, but thought it better to defer it.

'Dear Maddy,' she said, in a compassionate voice, 'I wish with all my heart I could help you.'

Madeline thanked her, but was not much comforted, and went to prepare for going out. There was a raised, broad, gravel walk, at the bottom of the garden—a favourite resort of the elder girls. Here they walked up and down, especially on a Sunday afternoon in spring or summer, when they went to church in the evening and not in the afternoon; and without any particular rule, it was generally understood that the younger ones were not to go there unless they were invited. Ruth paused when she reached the spot. She was only just beginning to feel that her position in the school was becoming higher—that she was not quite a child.

'Won't you come?' said Mary, kindly, and Ruth only hesitated a moment to be certain that Madeline had a companion; and when she saw her occupied with Janet Harding, was but too happy to be made one of the senior party. Alice and Clara Manners had collected around them the same noisy set that had been with them in the school-room; and Madeline and Janet were too much out of spirits to join them. Janet was thinking of her home, which she had left but a few weeks before, for the first time in her life, after having been indulged till her naturally good disposition was much spoiled. Madeline had before her a vision of the blotted text-book, and Mrs Carter's grave look of displeasure, and her sister, Miss Barnard's severe reprimand.

'That Clara Manners should be called Ill Manners,' said Janet. 'I never saw any one so rude.'

Madeline agreed that she could not endure her. After two years at school, Madeline was but little guarded in her remarks, and professed her likings and dislikings as vehemently as others.

'How she caught me up about the house of bondage!' continued Janet.

Digitized by Google

'But, Janet,' said Madeline, 'you do say very odd things sometimes.'

'That was not odd, that I can see. Mrs Carter told us bondage meant slavery—being made to do hard things, and not able to get away, and that is just what it is here.'

This was very true, yet Madeline remembered what her papa had often taught her, that the house of bondage was a type or figure of the evil condition in which all men are born; when being slaves to sin they have no prospect of ever reaching heaven, the land of promise; and she knew that for Christians there is now no house of bondage, since they are delivered from that state at their baptism, and for their Saviour's sake have the hope of one day being perfectly happy, unless like the Israelites they forfeit their blessings by wilful sin. Madeline had never thought of school as being like anything she had read of in the Bible, and Janet's remarks confused her. She put her hand up to her forehead, as if by rubbing it her ideas would become clearer.

'I don't think it can be such tasks as we have, which Mrs Carter meant,' she continued; 'because, you know, Janet, that we have help, and the Israelites had not. They must have been much worse off than we are.'

'Well! I don't know about that,' replied Janet; 'I know I hate school, and I know it is just like the house of bondage, and I shall always call it so.' This sentence was spoken rather loudly, and Janet did not see that Clara Manners and Alice were close to her.

'At it still! I declare,' exclaimed Clara, laughing. 'What! have you not finished that matter yet?'

Janet's manner changed in an instant; she shrank into herself, looked frightened, and would have moved on, but Clara caught hold of her. 'Now, Janet, you shall stay and talk to us a little.'

'No, Clara, she shall not,' said Madeline, firmly, and trying to push Clara's hand away.

'Oh! that is it, is it?' exclaimed Clara: 'we will soon see which is the strongest.' She grasped poor Janet's thin arm till the colour was in her cheek from pain, and then continued, 'Just say that you will answer my question, Janet; and I will let go.'

'I won't, if you keep me here all day,' said Janet, though her countenance showed how much she was suffering.

Digitized by Google

'That is right; for shame, Clara!' exclaimed both Alice and Madeline, whilst little Jessie O'Neile ran to the elder girls to make the usual complaint, that Clara Manners was teasing Janet Harding.

Mary Vernon was the person Jessie appealed to, for Mary was the redresser of all grievances, and by general consent had been chosen a sort of judge. Indeed the title was become almost as natural as her own name; and the office being found very useful, it was settled that when Mary left school another judge should be appointed in her place. Mary, however, was slow in giving her opinion; she liked to hear what was to be said on both sides; and made a point of never expressing any feeling when a case was first brought to her. However indignant she might be, the anger was kept to herself; but one of her companions, who had no occasion to be particularly cautious, was not only vehement in declaring that Clara Manners was the torment of the school, and that Mrs Carter ought to know it, but seemed inclined to interpose herself. This was Anna Grant, a girl about a year younger than Mary, and considerably shorter and stouter in appearance. Anna had been several years with Mrs Carter, Mary only three. Anna was remarkably clever, Mary only moderately so. Anna was active in her movements, and always spoke with an air of authority. Mary was slow and quiet, and used her office of judge so gently that it seemed a matter of indifference to her whether she ruled or not. There were different opinions in the school, at one time, as to who would make the best judge, and Anna was nearly certain that when Mary went away at Midsummer, she should be chosen. Of all things Anna liked to rule, and in the prospect of her future dignity she could not resist putting herself forward now and then. 'Let me go,' she said, stepping before Mary; 'I will soon set it all to rights.' 'Nonsense, Anna, how can you interfere with what does not concern you? Do let Mary manage it her own way.' Anna drew back, more from the consciousness of being in the wrong, than from any particular respect to the interrupting party, one of two sisters, Florence and Harriet Trevelyan, who, from being more remarkable for a very rapid way of speaking, and a fondness for fine names, fine people, and fine dresses, than for anything else, were often turned into ridicule, and sometimes, to their great annoyance, called Hurry and Flurry. Ruth seeing that Madeline was engaged in the quarrel, if such it could be called, followed Mary

Digitized by Google

Vernon to the spot where Clara, having at length been persuaded to release her hold, stood laughing. 'It is all over now,' said Clara, carelessly, as Mary came up. 'There is no occasion for any one to interfere. It was only a little fun, but Janet is such a poor thing, she is only fit to sit up in a high chair and eat soup.' Madeline was beginning an excuse for Janet, but Mary Vernon recommended silence. Every one knew, she said, that it was of no use to argue with Clara Manners; but there should be no tyranny in the school as long as she could prevent it, and if Clara would not take warning in time, she would most certainly speak to Mrs Carter. Clara knew that this was much more than a threat. What Mary said she would do, she always did; and though she pretended to be indifferent, she walked away in reality very sulky.

'I must say one thing to you,' continued Mary, addressing those who were near; 'I am sure you induce Clara to be worse by joining with her. Very often she would not be half as provoking as she is, if you did not make a joke of it; and then when she begins she does not know how to leave off.'

Alice felt as if the reproof was meant for her. She had been with Clara all the afternoon; not that she liked her, she was really fonder of Ruth than of any one else in the school, but her spirits carried her away.

'And I thought, Alice,' said Ruth, turning to her, 'that you meant to try very hard to-day to be steady?'

Alice blushed, and appeared annoyed for the moment; and Mary saw, what Ruth did not, that Alice did not like her private resolutions, told in confidence, to be mentioned openly.

'Well,' said Mary, good-naturedly, 'it is all over now. I daresay Clara will leave off being troublesome by and by.'

'But it is not all over,' observed Ruth. 'Look, Mary, how Janet Harding is crying still.'

Alice laughed a little, and said it was quite true that Janet was a great baby in some things, and could not bear a joke, and that was the reason Clara made fun of her. 'And the fuss is all about nothing,' she continued. 'It began, Mary, because Janet said that school was like the house of bondage, and you know one could not help laughing at that.'

Ruth listened with some interest to hear the answer; but, instead of answering, Mary went up to the spot where Madeline and Janet were sitting together, and spoke very kindly to Janet,

Digitized by Google

begging her not to cry any more, and promising to endeavour to prevent Clara from tormenting her.

'It is not that I care for,' exclaimed Janet, and her dull gray eyes grew quite bright with eagerness. 'I don't care for Clara, nor Alice, nor any of them; they may all laugh at me, if they like, all day long; but I want to be at home, and to see my own dear mamma. I knew I should be miserable at school.'

'Well, Janet, it must be very hard to you to be here,' said Mary, compassionately, 'harder than it would be for a great many; but I am almost certain you will be happy when you are used to it; and, at all events, school will not last for ever.'

'That was what I said,' observed Madeline. 'I told Janet that Ruth, and Alice, and I, were very unhappy at first, and thought the ways strange till we got into them; but I don't mind school at all now.'

Janet still went on crying with a determination which seemed to refuse all comfort.

'And Janet says, too,' pursued Madeline, 'that writing out the texts made her unhappy, because she thinks we are all like the Israelites in Egypt.'

A smile stole over Mary Vernon's face, but she checked any light thoughts, and replied gravely, 'that she should have said they were much more like the Israelites in the wilderness.'

'They were very unhappy,' said Janet, trying to stop her tears.

'They were only unhappy when they did wrong, Janet, and broke the laws.'

'I don't break Mrs Carter's laws,' said Janet. 'I always try to keep them.'

'And Mrs Carter is not angry with you,' continued Mary: 'and if you think it hard to be laughed at, only remember the hardships which the Israelites had to bear when they were travelling. But God would have supported and helped them, and brought them safely to the promised land; so they had no cause to be miserable, except from their own fault, and it is the same with us.'

Janet seemed more inclined to be comforted than before. As long as she could think there would be an end to her troubles, she could bear them pretty well. Mary's way of talking also suited her. It was the way to which she had been accustomed; for her parents, though they spoiled her by indulgence, were of a very religious turn of mind, and accustomed to bring examples

Digitized by Google

or illustrations for every case from the Bible; and when Janet had once possessed herself with the idea that school was like the Egyptian house of bondage, it did really seem so to her, and she had the same longing desire to be free which a prisoner might have.

'Then you really think it is like being in the wilderness?' she asked, looking up at Mary, and drying her eyes.

'Papa says sometimes to us that it is,' interrupted Madeline; 'but then he tells us it will be the same for our whole lives.'

Mary Vernon became very thoughtful as Madeline spoke. She was soon going to leave school, and immediately afterwards she was to be confirmed. It seemed as if she were really about to brave the difficulties of the wilderness—at least she had been warned that she was—that her life from henceforth would be more dangerous than it had ever yet been. Sometimes Mary could not believe it. Home was so happy, her friends were so kind, her future prospects so bright: but this day was Sunday, and she had been reading with Mrs Carter, and talking seriously. It was not to be wondered at that Madeline's remark should make her thoughtful; she did not, however, speak particularly of herself, and only answered, that she had been told the same; but that Mrs Carter once advised her not to trouble herself about the future, but to try and do right at present.

'And it is easier to keep the rules than the Ten Commandments, is it not, Mary?' asked Madeline.

'O Maddy!' exclaimed Janet, now really laughing; 'why, the Ten Commandments are about stealing and murdering.'

Mary seemed a little puzzled what answer to make, and just then the school bell summoned them to the house, and fixed all Madeline's thoughts upon her blotted text-book.

CHAPTER XIX.

MRS CARTER'S private room—the study—was the same into which Alice had been shown on the first day of her school life. No one could doubt that it was a comfortable room, nicely furnished, fitted with books, and always neat, but for some reason or other it was seldom entered without dread.

Digitized by Google

Either there was a reproof expected, or an exercise to be shown, or a lesson to be said. Suspense and uncertainty seemed to belong to it naturally, and though Mrs Carter was kind in her manner, ever ready to make allowance, and when she did find fault, doing it in the gentlest way, no one could help feeling this. Ruth whispered, as she stood at the door with her neat text-book, that her hand trembled; it always did when she went to the study. The whisper was to Madeline, who was too frightened to answer, but Alice spoke for her, declaring that she did not care for anything if Miss Barnard was not there, and Clara had seen her giving out the Sunday books in the outer school-room. 'Come in, my dears,' was heard in an encouraging voice. Ruth quite laughed at finding herself unable to open the door, but Clara Manners stretched out her hand boldly, and they entered; Janet Harding keeping close to Madeline, who, she believed, was going to suffer for good-nature to her. But Sunday was not a day on which Mrs Carter liked to make any one suffer if she could help it. The book received but a mild censure, much more mild than Madeline felt it deserved, and she was just thinking how happily she had escaped, when Mrs Carter's gentle 'Stay, my dear, I wish to speak to you,' brought back all her first alarms. 'And Ruth, too,' continued Mrs Carter: 'sit down, my dears, and the rest may go.' It was Mrs Carter's very quietness which was so alarming; her slow way of speaking, and deep, low tone. It was said sometimes, that if she would only be very angry it would not be half as awful. This, however, was the opinion of the more careless portion of the community. Mrs Carter was much beloved by the little children; Jessie O'Neile and Ellen Hastings were as fond of her as of their own grandmammas; and Mary Vernon could not bear to be reminded that she must so soon leave her. 'I have been wishing to say a few words to you both,' began Mrs Carter, 'because I think it may be of use'—then came a pause, and the sisters looked at each other, wondering what was to follow—'of use to you all—to yourselves and your companions.' Then it was not a reproof for the blotted book—Madeline was much relieved. 'You have been with me now nearly three years, and on the whole, I have had great reason to be satisfied with you—with you, Ruth, particularly.' A second pause: Ruth's head was involuntarily drawn up a little higher, but Madeline was more vexed at the distinction than pleased with the praise. 'Mary Vernon is to leave me very soon,' con-

Digitized by Google

tinued Mrs Carter, 'and you know what a great loss she will be. She has done more towards keeping order and good conduct in the school than any young person of her age, who has ever been under my care. When she is gone there will be no one to take her place.' A proud thought glanced through Ruth's mind. Could Mrs Carter imagine it possible for her to be like Mary? But no, Mrs Carter knew Mary too well to expect to find all her steadiness and high principle in one so much younger. She merely wished to suggest that something might be done by every one, especially by those who, like Ruth and Madeline, had received particular advantages; and Ruth was considerably disappointed when this long beginning ended with: 'but I think, my dears, that you may be of use amongst the little ones, if you will give yourselves the trouble; and really make it a part of your duty to see that they do theirs.' 'Amongst the little ones!' This was not what Ruth desired. She said 'Yes,' in a submissive manner, but nothing more. Madeline's feelings were different. For the first time since she came to school, she saw that she was considered capable of being useful, and Mrs Carter's very sweet smile, and the particularly kind way in which she addressed them, aroused her warm affections. To be spoken to in this way though she had been careless! Even her own mamma could scarcely have done more. 'Now, Madeline,' added Mrs Carter, 'I am most anxious about you. It is example which is the great thing always. If the younger children see you inattentive and thoughtless, bringing me such a book as this, for instance,'—and as Mrs Carter laid her hand upon the unfortunate text-book, Madeline's cheeks became the colour of crimson—'not all the warning and hints you can give them will be of any avail. They will never think you in earnest; and it is being in earnest which makes persons attend to us, whether we are young or old.' 'Indeed, I will try,' exclaimed Madeline, eagerly, and at the moment it seemed to her that she could not help being in earnest for the rest of her life.

Mrs Carter looked pleased, and said, 'God bless you, my love, and keep you in earnest always. He will keep you if you pray to Him. But, Madeline, can you tell me what it is which makes it so difficult to us to be in earnest?'

'Because we are wicked,' replied Madeline.

'Yes; but that is not quite an answer to my question. Many persons, who are not what is generally called wicked, who do not commit great crimes, yet cannot be said to be in

Digitized by Google

earnest. Ruth, what do we mean by being earnest in anything we undertake?'

'Setting ourselves to do it with all our hearts,' replied Ruth.

'Yes, giving ourselves up to it; wishing for it constantly; planning how we shall manage it. And we find that when persons set themselves in earnest to attain any object—to be rich or learned, for instance, they generally succeed. They have one great pursuit, and they devote themselves to it. But we are not naturally willing to do this in religion. We wish, perhaps, to serve God, but we also wish to follow our own wills. We forget that we are told to have no other God but the God who made and redeemed us.'

Ruth ventured to say very timidly, 'She supposed that meant it was wrong to worship idols.'

'That is one meaning,' replied Mrs Carter; 'but there is another, of more consequence to us, because we have been so well instructed from childhood that we are in little danger of becoming idolaters outwardly. Our danger is in our own hearts.'

'I thought that no English people were idolaters,' said Madeline, speaking more boldly than Ruth.

'I wish I could think so, too, Madeline,' replied Mrs Carter; 'but when persons spend all their lives in striving to be rich—when they are covetous—we know from the Bible that they are idolaters; because it is said there that "Covetousness is idolatry." And so again, if they care only for eating and drinking, the Bible says the same thing. Or if they desire to be thought much of for cleverness; or to have high rank; or, in fact, whatever they most seek for, that is their idol: they are as anxious for it, more anxious, rather, than for the favour of God, and this prevents their being in earnest in His service.'

Mrs Carter paused, and Ruth and Madeline supposed she would tell them they might go; but after a few moments she added, 'My dear children, I should like you to make some use of what I have said. You know your own feelings better than I can. Will you think what it is which you most wish for; and when you say your prayers, ask of God to give you such a right spirit that you may have no other God but Him; that is, that it may be your chief desire in all things to please Him; and will you remember that the way in which you can especially please Him now, is by setting a good example? I think, without my telling

Digitized by Google

you, you will be able to find out the different ways in which you may thus make yourselves useful, and show that you are in earnest; and to-day being Sunday, you will have more time than usual to make right resolutions, and pray to God to assist you in keeping them.'

To make good resolutions, and pray that God would assist us in keeping them! This is much more easily said than done at school.

When Ruth and Madeline went back to their companions, they were assailed by numerous questions: 'Why were they detained?' 'What did Mrs Carter want?' 'Was she angry?' and the questions were so eager, and the din of voices was so confusing, that even a steady brain might have been distracted. The manner of the two sisters was not alike. Ruth said, with an indifferent air, 'that it was all nothing; Mrs Carter only wished them to try and keep the little children in order when Mary Vernon was gone.'

Madeline sat down to her desk, and begged them to be quiet, because she wanted to read.

'There is no time for reading,' observed Alice; 'the tea-bell will ring in a minute; you may just as well talk to us a little.'

'I had rather not, please, Alice,' replied Madeline, gently.

Alice looked at her in surprise.

'But, Maddy, dear, there must be something the matter. Is it about the text-book? was she angry?' inquired Janet Harding, with some anxiety.

'It is nothing; not about the text-book. Mrs Carter was not at all angry,' replied Madeline.

'But what is it? there must be something the matter; do tell us,' continued Alice.

Poor Madeline closed her book, and rose from her seat. How she longed to be alone! but for ten minutes—that she might only, as Mrs Carter had said, make good resolutions, and pray to God to assist her in keeping them. But there was the strict law forbidding her to go up-stairs, except at particular hours, or by express permission; and Madeline could not bring herself to ask this permission. She was afraid that Mrs Carter would guess what was passing in her mind, and she was just beginning to be very shy and reserved about her religious feelings. There was a small room, generally known by the name of the dressing-room, on the ground floor, very near the school-room. Here were kept boxes and baskets, garden cloaks, old bonnets, &c.,

Digitized by Google

and here she might be alone. She stopped for a few moments, that it might not seem as if she was angry, and then went out of the room. The dressing-room was empty, but she could not close the door or fasten it; and she did not like to kneel, lest she might be discovered. Madeline did not fear that God would not accept her prayers unless she knelt. Her papa, though extremely particular about forms and reverence, had always taught her that it is the heart which God looks at; and that if the forms are not in our power, He will accept the heart alone. She sat down on a trunk, and began to think. What was it she most wished for? She could not at all tell. There were so many things—little pleasures, books, prizes, the holidays; and greater ones—to please her papa and mamma, and be loved by her companions. Her head became confused with thinking, but she turned to another subject. How could she be useful by setting a good example? This was much more easily decided; and Madeline, after considering the wrong things she was in the habit of doing, made good resolutions for the future. These resolutions were not made in a general way, such as 'I will try to do better,' but in detail; first as to herself—rising early, dressing quickly, setting to work directly afterwards, not speaking English in school, not reading story books, or eating apples and cakes by stealth in the lesson hours, and so on through the day; and afterwards with regard to the particular points on which she knew her companions were neglectful. Madeline wished she could have determined what she most desired; she was afraid it might be wrong not to do so; but she need not have been afraid. It is a long time before we can understand what passes in our own hearts; but when we pray sincerely, and try to conquer our bad dispositions, we have good cause to hope we are not allowing ourselves to have any other God than the true God. And Madeline did pray. She stood and covered her face with her hands, and asked, in few and simple words, that God would forgive her all she had done wrong, and teach her to do better, and help her to be useful, for her Saviour's sake. Conscience whispered she was right; and amongst the cheerful voices and happy faces which were heard and seen as the party sat round the tea-table, none were happier or more cheerful than Madeline Clifford's.

Ruth also had received a warning. She had been told to question her own heart; to inquire what it was she most wished for. She was silent at tea-time, and Mary Vernon imagined

Digitized by Google

she must be thinking of her conversation with Mrs Carter. Ruth was thinking of it. Before tea was over, she had decided with regard to all her companions—whom they most sought to please—God, their fellow-creatures, or themselves. Only one individual was forgotten—herself.

'Will you hand me the bread and butter,' said Alice to Florence Trevelyan.

The plate was put before her, and she drew out a piece of crust which did not fall naturally to her share. Ruth watched her, and felt that self-indulgence was Alice's idol. Alice ate the crust quickly, not wishing it to be noticed that she had helped herself unfairly. In her hurry, some butter fell on Florence Trevelyan's pretty silk dress. Florence was extremely disconcerted, spoke crossly, and made a fuss, till every one was uncomfortable. Dress was Florence's idol. Presently, an accident of the same kind happened to Ruth herself, who was sitting on the other side of Alice. She kept her temper admirably; rubbed the spot to take out the mark, without drawing attention to herself, and then was rewarded by hearing Alice say—

'There is no one like Ruth after all; she is never ill-tempered.'

Mrs Carter smiled and said, 'It was right to try early to bear annoyances patiently.'

The glow of pride and self-sufficiency which flushed Ruth's face was taken for shyness at hearing herself praised. Ruth knew herself that she was shy: but why did she treasure up every word of praise to be thought over again and again? Why did she not watch her heart as well as her outward actions? The respect and admiration of her fellow-creatures was Ruth's idol.

CHAPTER XX.

MONDAY was a French day. There were French lessons said to Miss Barnard before breakfast, and Monsieur Le Vergnier came at nine o'clock, and was occupied with different classes till nearly one. Alice never liked a French day —Ruth did. Madeline did not care about it except when she had been idle, and then she was apt to wish, and wish aloud,

Digitized by Google

that Miss Barnard, Monsieur Le Vergnier, and the writers of every grammar and vocabulary that had ever been heard of, were at the bottom of the sea. On this Monday, however, Madeline had no such wishes. She felt cordial even to Miss Barnard—a quiet, stiff, particular, middle-aged lady, who made a point of enforcing Mrs Carter's rules more strictly than Mrs Carter herself, and appeared to have very little thought for anything that was going on beyond the routine of the school, and the careful performance of the monotonous duties which fell to her share in life. Madeline did not like Miss Barnard, and stood considerably in awe of her. It was with no slight pleasure, therefore, that she saw a smile cross her face as the dialogue book was returned, and heard her say, 'Very well, Madeline, you have taken pains.' Ruth often had such speeches made to her, but Madeline scarcely ever.

'You have your exercise ready for Monsieur, I daresay?' whispered Janet Harding, who was standing near, speaking a curious school-girl 'patois,' which few but those accustomed to it could understand.

'Not quite; I did not finish it on Saturday, but I shall make haste;' and Madeline sat down directly to her work. It had been one of her morning resolutions not to waste a minute's time. Madeline wrote but a few words, when they were called in to prayers and breakfast; but she was the first to return to business. The rest, in general, idled about under the excuse that it was not worth while to do anything before school actually began. Ruth was an exception. She took possession of the piano to practise. Alice was amongst the idlers; and with her were Florence Trevelyan, Clara, and Janet Harding. Something was said about Monsieur Le Vergnier's accent. Florence declared it was bad; Alice pronounced it good; Clara did not think about it, but she took the opportunity of mimicking it; and Janet Harding said, in her peculiarly melancholy tone, that Monsieur Le Vergnier spoke very like an aunt of hers who was brought up in France. There was no great sense or importance in the conversation, but from some cause or other they became rather excited. Florence was angry at being at all contradicted by Janet; and Alice was pleased to find some one who would agree with her. Florence protested that Alice could know nothing about it, for she was extremely backward in French; and Alice retaliated by reminding Florence of a speech of Miss Barnard's that very morning; that if Harriet and Florence only

Digitized by Google

knew half as much about any one sensible subject as they did about dress, they would be extremely clever girls. The clock struck nine. Miss Barnard would come in in a minute; and Monsieur Le Vergnier was always punctual. Still there were no preparations, and the angry tones grew louder. Ruth left off practising, and begged they would prepare their books. Alice was inclined to listen to her—she always was inclined to hearken to Ruth; but Florence Trevelyan would have a last word, and then the case was put before Ruth. 'Did she think Monsieur Le Vergnier had a good or a bad accent?' Ruth did not pretend to know herself, but she supposed it most probable that it was good, because if it were not Mrs Carter would not have engaged him. Alice, in the midst of her irritations, could not help laughing. The answer was so like Ruth, simple, and to the point; and she turned to Florence with an air of triumph, exclaiming—

'There, Florence, what can you say to that? Ruth is as good as a judge any day.'

Words! how little do we know the effect they will have! Ruth said to herself, 'as good as a judge.' As good as Mary Vernon that meant. And why should she not be? There was nothing to prevent her—there is nothing to prevent any of us from being like saints. But Ruth was not thinking of Mary Vernon's heart so much as of her position—the respect in which she was held; that was what she coveted—to be first. Alice said she was as good as a judge, and Florence Trevelyan agreed: perhaps they would rather have her as a judge than Anna Grant. If she were not so little and so young, she might be chosen. It was the first thought of ambition, and Ruth cherished it.

Monsieur Le Vergnier came; the routine of lessons went on. There were the usual number of mistakes and negligences; the usual marks in the exercise books, in Monsieur Le Vergnier's cramped French hand, and the reckoning up of the whole at the end against the names of those who were trying for the French prize. One day is so like another at school, and often in common life we scarcely seem to know them apart. Yet there is a difference. To-day is not as yesterday; we are nearer heaven or farther from it. Which is it?

Madeline stayed for a few minutes in the dressing-room alone, when the others left it after preparing for dinner, and thought of what she had been doing. She had made Monsieur

Digitized by Google

Le Vergnier angry by whispering—that was wrong; but she had written her exercise well—that was right. She had felt vexed because Clara Manners was more perfect than herself in the vocabulary; but she had been trying to help Janet out of a difficulty. The good and evil seemed nearly equal; yet Madeline again said a short, earnest prayer, and was happy. It is not the belief that we never do wrong that gives us peace, but the hope that God is looking favourably upon us because we are trying to find out our faults and conquer them.

Florence Trevelyan and Alice renewed their discussion of Monsieur Le Vergnier's accent after dinner. Florence was often in the habit of continuing a subject till every one grew weary of it. She was not clever, and her judgment was bad, and accordingly, like a great many other persons, she tried to make up for her weakness by obstinacy. There was a little spite also mixed with her feelings about Monsieur Le Vergnier. He had a daughter, a pretty, elegant girl, about the same age as herself, who was sometimes asked to drink tea with them, and was a general favourite. Comparisons were sometimes made between Florence and Justine Le Vergnier, and frequently to the disadvantage of Florence. Even the French name was liked better than the English, and Florence, who did not believe that any other young lady in England boasted such a pretty name as Florence Trevelyan, was as much provoked at this as if she had been excelled in any real advantage. The feeling, however, was lessening. Justine was engaging and good-natured, willing to give the patterns of her French dresses, and had once made Florence a present of a smelling-bottle. It was said in the school that by and by Florence and Justine would be great friends; and it certainly was amusing to watch the influence which Justine was gradually acquiring, although occasionally, as in the present instance, the old feeling would break out.

On one point Florence was always strenuous in asserting her superiority, and that was rank; and now finding that the majority were against her, she turned to this point of attack, and asserted that it was not likely Monsieur Le Vergnier should speak well, because he was not a gentleman. Mary Vernon, who had taken no part in the discussion, was leaving the room when the observation was made. She stopped immediately, and begged Florence to be careful in what she stated. 'Monsieur Le Vergnier was, she believed, quite a gentleman by birth,

Digitized by Google

and it was evident he was so in manner.' Florence was not pleased by this 'put down,' as she called it, and when Mary was gone she repeated her former remark, adding that her papa and mamma were very particular as to society; therefore, of course, she must be as well able to decide upon Monsieur Le Vergnier's manner as Mary Vernon. In her excitement, Florence spoke quicker than usual, and Alice, without exactly meaning to be ill-natured, exclaimed—

'Well done, Flurry!—now, Hurry, what have you to say? you always go together.'

Florence grew very angry, and drawing herself up, replied, 'that it was not any use to talk to such a child as Alice—she could not understand; and besides, there was not the same reason for her to be particular as there was for them.'

Alice was perplexed to discover the meaning of this speech. When Florence wished to be dignified, she was often rather misty in her mode of expression.

'I do not see the difference between you and me, Florence,' she observed, more quietly than might have been expected.

'Don't you?' and Florence walked away with a peculiar smile.

'The bell! Hush! Mrs Carter will be coming,' exclaimed Madeline, who, with Ruth, was preparing her Italian translation, apart from the others.

Alice went up to Ruth.

'Ruth, is not Florence silly and tiresome?'

'I did not hear what she said,' replied Ruth. 'You have done your translation, I believe; just let me know what this word is.'

Alice did as she was desired, and went away. She felt that Ruth was chilling.

'I will tell you what it all means,' said Clara Manners, when Alice sat down by her, and complained. 'Florence thinks herself a great person because—I don't know why exactly—some nonsense which I never took the trouble to listen to—but she fancies that Lady Catharine Hyde adopted you because your mamma was poor. She very often says so.'

'Does she? My mamma poor!' exclaimed Alice. 'My mamma was Lady Catharine's friend; she loved her dearly.'

'But why?' asked Clara; 'what made them such friends?'

'Why, a great many reasons; she loved her dearly,' again repeated Alice.

Digitized by Google

'Hush! Alice, hush!' said Madeline, leaning back and touching Alice's arm.

Alice, however, was in no humour to take a hint. She went on speaking, not perceiving that Mrs Carter was in the room.

'Who is talking? A forfeit, if you please,' said Mrs Carter.

Alice opened her desk, took out a little bag, drew from it a ticket with her name upon it, and laid it before Mrs Carter.

'It 's all Flurry's fault,' she contrived to whisper to Clara, and Clara nodded an assent, which gave Alice a friendly feeling towards her.

The forfeit was no light thing. Only one ticket for good conduct was given during the day, and all who possessed a certain number at the end of the half year received a prize. Alice had never yet succeeded in obtaining this; but she had lately resolved to try very hard for it. It would be such a pleasure to carry back a good-conduct prize to Lady Catharine. A greater misfortune, however, than the loss of the ticket was the distraction of Alice's mind. She had accustomed herself to believe that because Lady Catharine Hyde had adopted her she must be deemed by every one a person of importance; and, in general, considerable respect was paid her. Now, she tried to remember what Lady Catharine had ever told her about her mamma; but as she was called away to a music lesson in the middle of her cogitations, there was not much opportunity for such recollections. Alice did not know how to govern her thoughts or force her attention, and all the afternoon she was in a painful state trying to do one thing and think of another; and so inattentive that Mrs Carter was seriously displeased, and instead of allowing her to amuse herself after tea, sent her to the outer school-room to sit alone, and prepare her lessons for the next day.

These were soon finished; but still Alice remained in solitude and thought. What did she really know of her mamma? It was strange to find how little it was. Lady Catharine seldom mentioned Mrs Lennox. Sometimes, indeed, she would show Alice her picture, and say that her mother was as saint-like in mind as she was lovely in feature; and occasionally she would relate anecdotes of her patience and goodness, but this was all; and Alice, thinking that the apparent disinclination to continue the subject must arise from the same cause as Lady Catharine's silence regarding her husband, feared to make her unhappy by asking questions, besides standing in great awe of her. How

Digitized by Google

Alice herself first gained the idea of Lady Catharine's extreme affection for her mamma she could not tell. It seemed to have grown up with her, to be as much a matter of course as that she should be fond of Ruth and Madeline; but this was no answer to Clara's question—'Why it was?' Alice never could endure delay or uncertainty. If a doubt entered her mind it must be solved instantly. She was determined to know all that was to be told her, and this could only be by writing to Lady Catharine. If it had been necessary to speak she might have been afraid, but a letter was easier. She was quick in writing, and Lady Catharine was always pleased to hear from her, and the result of the solitary evening was a request the next day that she might be allowed to write home.

Ruth's passing thought, that if she were older and better she might be chosen as judge, returned again. It came in the shape of a castle in the air; a plan as to what she would do if she were judge; how she would be particular that the little ones learned their lessons properly, and were ready for church in good time; and were neatly dressed when visitors came to drink tea; with other cases of the same kind. She found also a satisfaction in comparing herself with Anna Grant, and in imagining the praises which she herself would most probably receive for her attention. To obtain the good-conduct prize from Mrs Carter, and to be deemed worthy the office of judge by her schoolfellows, were now the objects of Ruth's highest ambition. Madeline alone shared Ruth's confidence, for Madeline was always inclined to sympathise; and the respect which she entertained for Ruth made her feel that no wish or scheme of hers could be out of place. If Ruth had desired to be a princess, Madeline would have been willing to believe that the idea was not an absurdity.

'You must not say anything about it, though, Madeline, dear,' said Ruth, as they remained talking together in the dressing-room, a few days after the notion first suggested itself to Ruth's mind. 'They would all laugh, now. I am so little. But, I mean by and by, a long time off, I should not wonder; should you?'

'After Anna Grant, perhaps,' said Madeline; 'if we stay here till then.'

'Anna Grant will not be here long,' replied Ruth. 'She is not so very much younger than Mary.'

'But she must stay some time, for you to grow taller.'

Digitized by Google

'I have grown a good deal lately,' observed Ruth, stretching her neck.

'Yes; but then to be judge you ought to be so very tall.'

'I don't know,' replied Ruth, with a disappointed air. 'Anna will never be tall, Mrs Carter says.'

'Oh! but, Ruth, just think of the difference between you,' exclaimed Madeline. 'Anna looks grown up. But perhaps we shall go home again before she leaves school, and then you will be happy, and will not care about being judge.'

Without answering, Ruth went away, whilst Madeline sat down on a trunk, and indulged in a pleasant dream of home; of the quiet, low-roofed Parsonage, the smooth lawn, the old elm-trees, the long green walk, and then, the sweet face of her mamma, and the warm, fond kiss of her papa. Madeline quite forgot she was at school, and was only brought back to the knowledge of it by a tap on the shoulder from Alice, who asked her what she was doing there all alone.

'I was thinking about home, the holidays,' said Madeline: 'don't you often think about them, Alice?'

'Yes; but I like school.'

'So do I sometimes. I believe I do always when I am not remembering home.'

'I wish my home was the Parsonage,' observed Alice.

Madeline looked at her kindly, and said, 'Alice, dear, when we are grown up, and we all go back to Laneton, it will be nearly like living in the same house; only then you will be much grander than we are.'

'I don't want to be grand, Maddy; but I should like to have a mamma.'

'Papa says Lady Catharine loves you dearly,' replied Madeline.

'Does he? I wonder whether she does.'

'O, Alice! you must be sure of it. How often you have told me that she calls you her child.'

'Yes, she calls me so, but she is so strict, and the Manor is dull. I am sure I should be happier if I had a mamma.'

Madeline found it difficult to say anything comforting upon this subject. She had never forgotten Lady Catharine's sternness upon the occasion of Alice's entering the shut-up rooms, and it had often since astonished her that Alice could be even as unconstrained as she was in Lady Catharine's presence.

'Lady Catharine does not talk much about dear mamma,' continued Alice. 'I wrote to her last Friday to ask about her.'

Digitized by Google

'O, Alice! how could you venture?' exclaimed Madeline, her eyes opening wide in surprise.

'I don't know,' replied Alice. 'Florence Trevelyan asked me questions, and I did not know what to answer, so I thought I would find out.'

'But will Lady Catharine be angry?' asked Madeline.

'I don't know; I never know about her, Madeline. How I wish I had a mamma!'

Alice's eyes were full of tears, and Madeline, though she longed to say something consoling, could not in the least think what it should be.

'I am sure I should be better if I had a mamma,' continued Alice.

'Some one to teach you, you mean?'

'No, I don't. Mrs Carter teaches me, and Lady Catharine teaches me; but I should like to have some one to love me.'

'Ruth and I love you, Alice, dearly.'

'Ruth does not,' replied Alice: 'she is much fonder of Mary Vernon and of Jessie O'Neile, than she is of me.'

'Every one is fond of Jessie,' replied Madeline; 'because she talks so oddly.'

'It does not signify why it is, Madeline; but you know very well, that Ruth likes to be put with the old girls; and I think, one reason why she helps Jessie often is, because it makes her seem old. She would not do her history with me, yesterday; though it would have saved me a great deal of trouble.'

'Mrs Carter thinks that Ruth is as useful as any of the old girls,' observed Madeline; 'I heard her say so the other day.'

'Well, you don't understand; it is no use talking,' answered Alice; 'you have a mamma, and I have not, and there is the difference.'

Madeline was puzzled to know what connection there could be between this last observation and the former one, and she was silent. The tea-bell rang. Alice joined her companions, and said little. She was dwelling upon her own solitariness; unhappy, she scarcely knew why—but in reality longing to be quite certain that she was an object of affection to some one.

'The postman! I saw him,' exclaimed little Jessie, the next day, bursting into the room just as the desks were being opened, and the books brought out in preparation for the morning's work. 'Sure, and he'll be here in a minute.'

'You peeped then, Jessie,' said Janet Harding; 'peeping is wrong.'

Digitized by Google

'Ah, well! and if I did, I have not got a forfeit. Ruth, dear, I hope you 'll have a letter.'

Ruth shook her head, doubtfully, and beckoning to Jessie, advised her to be steady, and to begin looking over a lesson.

'He is a long time coming,' observed Florence. 'Hark! wasn't that the knock?'

Alice was at her desk, searching in it for a paper she had lost. Her hand was unsteady and she could not well hold the lid open.

'Now! let us wager who will have letters,' cried Clara Manners. 'I will bet you a halfpenny, Florence, that you will not.'

'I don't expect one. Harriet and I heard yesterday.'

'Well then, Ruth;—no, Ruth won't bet;—Alice, Alice Lennox, I will bet you a halfpenny, that there will be no letter for you this morning.'

Alice shut her desk, and looked up quickly: 'I bet you a halfpenny, there will be.'

'No betting,' said Anna Grant, who just then came in and overheard the exclamation; 'or I shall report to Mrs Carter.'

Alice was provoked at the tone, and Clara Manners replied sharply—

'There is no need of telling Mrs Carter. Governess Anna can punish without her.'

'I think Alice forgot the rule, Anna,' observed Ruth; 'and she was not with us the other day when Mrs Carter spoke about laying wagers.'

'Yes, I did forget,' replied Alice, evidently pleased at Ruth's interference. She recovered herself instantly; and rising, went to look into the passage, in the hope of seeing the postman.

A servant entered the room. Some of the young ladies were wanted in Mrs Carter's study. Miss Grant, Miss Harding, and Miss Lennox. Anna and Janet were gone in a moment. Alice walked more slowly behind.

'Here are letters for you, my dears,' said Mrs Carter, in her mild, kind voice; 'I hope they will bring you good accounts from home.'

Alice did not break the seal; she wished to read her letter alone, but there was no place, the dressing-room excepted, and there she was open to interruption. She went back to the school-room. Her letter was a packet; it could not be skimmed over quickly, and Signor Berretoni, the Italian master, was expected every minute.

Digitized by Google

'Will you please show your exercise first,' she said, in an under-tone, going up to Ruth, who was still busy with Jessie O'Neile.

'Me! What for? It is not my turn.'

'But I can read my letter if you will.'

'Well, I will see; but no, I cannot; Jessie is not half perfect yet.'

Ruth spoke decisively, and Alice sat down disappointed. She would not beg a second time.

'I shall have finished my exercise in one minute,' said Madeline, twisting herself round on her stool to speak to Alice.

'Thank you,' was Alice's short reply; and Madeline, without thinking whether her manner was gracious, wrote on quickly—with a certain conviction in her own mind that she was making blunders, and regretting much that she had wasted her time the day before, and in consequence was as usual behindhand with her lessons.

'My very dear Alice.' What a strange beginning that was for Lady Catharine. Alice could scarcely imagine she read the words rightly. She went on rapidly, for Lady Catharine's handwriting was always legible. 'I can scarcely describe the pleasure your letter gave me. For the last three years, I may with truth say, it has been my great desire that you should value your dearest mother's memory. You were on earth her one great interest and joy, and surely we may believe that if the spirits of the blest are allowed to know that which passes upon earth, she is still watching over you with the tenderest affection. I cannot often talk to you about her, my dear Alice; I loved her too well for words; but I can write without difficulty; and I am thankful that you have at last given me the opportunity. You ask me to inform you how it was that your dear mother and I first became acquainted. You know that we were at school together; that was the beginning of our friendship; we knew nothing of each other till then. I had been at school several years; indeed, I was almost the eldest when your mamma came. She was of a sickly constitution, even then; very little of her age, and shy, and backward in some things which, by young girls, are considered of importance. From these causes we were not much together; and there were other reasons. I was then of a very haughty disposition—thinking much of my rank, and encouraged in this feeling by my companions. I had no real friend, for I was not inclined to con-

Digitized by Google

sider any of my school-fellows my equal. My governess was a good person, but she was not like Mrs Carter; she did not know all our characters, and she fostered my faults, unconsciously, by always putting me first. By this means I acquired many bad habits without being corrected; amongst others, my manner in church was very irreverent. I was allowed to sit in a back seat with other of the elder girls; and not considering the awful Presence in which we were, we allowed ourselves to lounge, and whisper, and even to sit during the prayers. It so happened that in consequence of the illness of one of my companions, there was one day a vacant seat in what was always called my pew. Your dear mamma was chosen to fill it. She sat next to me, and I supposed she would do as I did. In fact, I had such an idea of my own consequence that I imagined it quite right my example should be followed. To my surprise I found that, at the risk of making herself singular, and in consequence disliked, your mamma was resolved to kneel during the prayers, and kept her eyes steadily fixed upon her book. I was extremely annoyed, and in spite contrived to place myself so that she could not kneel without crowding me. This I thought would be a sufficient check, for I was always treated with much outward politeness. But your mamma, my dear Alice, seemed as bent upon having her way as I was upon having mine. She made a sign to the others to move lower down so as to give me room, which they could easily do, and then she knelt as before. Upon our return home there was a general outcry against her. Almost all declared that the seat being full it was impossible to kneel; and that no fault had been found with us for not doing so; and one of the party remarked that common courtesy might have induced your mamma to behave more civilly to her superior in rank. To this she answered quietly, and with some hesitation, that she was willing to show me all proper respect, but that she had been taught to consider a church as the house of God, and that she was bound to honour Him before me. The observation struck me very much, but it made me angry; and not knowing what reply to give, I told her that when she grew up she would understand her duty better. One or two of our companions smiled at this speech, which made me still more indignant, for I saw that I had been foolish as well as wrong, and I went away. The next day we were reading in the Bible the account of the golden image which Nebuchadnezzar set up

Digitized by Google

in the plain of Dura. We were examined upon it afterwards, and amongst other questions I was asked how Christians could commit the same sort of sin as Nebuchadnezzar. I was not quite prepared with an answer, and the question went round till it came to your mamma, who said, "by paying more honour to our fellow-creatures than to God." You may imagine how provoked I was to hear this, knowing what must be in her mind; but it was worse for me when I was called upon for a still further explanation, for I became confused in consequence. Our governess was shocked at what she imagined my ignorance, and from her way of talking I soon perceived that she had some particular reason for bringing the subject forward. She told us that we probably looked upon ourselves as innocent of any sin at all approaching to that of Nebuchadnezzar, because we never worshipped idols, but that God, who knew our hearts and our secret actions, would judge very differently; and then she alluded to our irreverent conduct in church, which had been remarked by one of the teachers, and which, she said, was like idolatry—an insult to the majesty of God, and would most surely bring down punishment upon our heads, if persisted in. I felt conscience-stricken, and thoroughly ashamed at deserving this reproof myself; but I expected to hear your dear mamma justify herself, perhaps at my expense. She was, however, naturally timid, besides fearing to do harm to us by excusing herself; and when the task which was set as a punishment was shown to us, she took her book to learn it with the others. As she was returning to her seat, I heard our governess say, "I expected better things from Alice Mortimer; she has had such good instruction." Injustice always touched me greatly. This speech was unjust, though not wilfully so; and I could not bear it. Before all the school I stepped forward and declared her innocence, whilst I acknowledged my own fault in striving to turn her from her duty.

'From that day, Alice, your dear mamma and I were friends, —friends in the best sense of the word—anxious to assist each other in our duties. She professed herself very grateful to me, and I had great reason to be grateful to her; for she was the first person who made me see that my rank was a cause, not for pride, but for greater care in all my actions.

'We were at school together for a year and a half, and every day made us more and more fond of each other. As the elder, my education was the first finished; but I was scarcely glad to

Digitized by Google

return home, from grief at the thought of leaving my cherished companion. Before parting, we made a mutual agreement, that wherever we might be, and under whatever circumstances, we should never cease, if possible, to write to each other; and that if trial should befall us, we would instantly apply to each other for comfort and help. Many would think this a rash engagement; perhaps it was so. Yet it has often appeared to me since that the blessing of God was upon it. If He is a jealous God, not permitting honour to be shown to any creature before Him, so is He also a most gracious God, showing mercy unto thousands of them that love Him—showing mercy unto you, my own Alice, for the sake of your most dear mother.

'After leaving school, we were separated for several years. Our homes were distant, and circumstances prevented our meeting. I was the first married; and on that occasion the friend whom I so truly loved was with me. She acted as my bridesmaid. About three years afterwards, she married herself, and went abroad. Your father, my dear Alice, as I have often told you, I never saw; but I know that he was in every way worthy of the treasure which he possessed in his wife, and during the short period of their married life, rendered her as happy as on earth we are ever permitted long to be. During the time of their residence in Ceylon, your mother and I still kept up a constant correspondence. No change had any influence over our affection, for it was an affection not of this world. It pleased God to visit us differently, one with joy, the other with sorrow, nearly at the same time. Soon after she had cause to rejoice in your birth, I was tried by the greatest affliction of my life. But in the midst of her own happiness, your dear mamma could sympathise with my grief, and more than ever I then felt the blessing of her friendship. All that happened afterwards you well know; you have often heard of your long residence in Ceylon, and you are acquainted with all the particulars of your papa's illness and death. After that sad event, I entreated your dear mamma to settle in Laneton, reminding her of her early promise; but she could not then comply with my wishes. Her own father and a sister were living, and she felt it her duty to go to them. Their death, however, soon followed, and your mamma fell into ill health. Then I prevailed upon her to come to me; and then it was that, by daily intercourse, by witnessing continually her meekness, patience, and fervent piety, I first knew all her worth.

Digitized by Google

God grant that the example may not have been sent me in vain. It was on her death-bed that she commended you to my care, Alice, my own child; and I have vowed in the sight of Heaven that, so far as in me lies, that solemn charge shall faithfully be kept.

'Now, may God bless you, and keep you, and make you His true servant, faithful unto the end, even like her who has entered into rest. So will you, indeed, be all that my heart can wish.—Your very affectionate and most constant friend,

'CATHARINE HYDE.'

'Alice,' said Florence Trevelyan, 'we have all shown our exercises, except you.'

Alice looked up, as if waking from a dream. Her eyes were full of tears. Signor Berretoni tapped his finger impatiently on the table. Madeline left her seat, took up Alice's exercise book, and placed it before him.

'Ask if anything is the matter at the Manor,' said Ruth, whispering to her sister in French across the desk. Alice smiled through her tears as she answered, 'No.' Ruth went on with her occupations contentedly, but Madeline took the opportunity of finding out a difficult passage in her Italian translation, and occupying Signor Berretoni's attention with it until Alice was quite recovered, and able to go to him.

CHAPTER XXI.

ALICE LENNOX was what is called a person of impulse. She had quick feelings, very earnest wishes, at times great energy; but she had little firmness of purpose. Alice's resolutions were frequently broken almost as soon as made. But she did not think it would be so now. Often as she had been disappointed with herself, she still lived in the hope of being one day really good—really like what she imagined Ruth to be.

The day on which she received Lady Catharine's letter was a day of good intentions. How indeed could it be otherwise? How could Alice read of her mother's gentle firmness, her sincerity, and piety, without a wish to resemble her? Even in the midst of the busy school-room, Alice's thoughts travelled back

Digitized by Google

to by-gone years—the white house and its little garden, the neat sitting-room, the bed-room with the curtains partly drawn, and Benson sitting by the bed-side, the table with jelly upon it, and lozenges, and oranges; and then the fair, wan cheek which rested upon the pillow, the thin hands, the soft, sweet voice, that distant shadowy image which was all she could imagine of her mother, except from a picture at the Manor, in Lady Catharine's boudoir, so full of life and health, that it was almost impossible to imagine it a representation of the same person. Alice thought of her mother as of something angelic. To be like her seemed impossible, but to follow her at a distance, to try to please her as if she was still living, was something more within her reach, and in pleasing her she would give pleasure to Lady Catharine.

If Alice had lived with those only who were religious, this might have been the turning-point of her life; the wishes now formed might have been acted upon for a continuance. But such is not the position which God provides for us. He sets before us good and evil, life and death. He makes us His children. He gives us good instructions, and promises to aid us with His Holy Spirit, when we pray to Him, and then He places us, as it were, in a battle with temptations before and behind and around us, and bids us fight and conquer.

Alice's great temptation lay in her companions; this she knew, and the first result of Lady Catharine's letter was to induce her to resolve firmly against being led away by evil example. If she could not be like Ruth, who was held up as a pattern to the school, still she thought it might be possible to be like Madeline, who kept on her quiet course, striving to improve, endeavouring to overcome her natural faults of carelessness, procrastination, and rather a hasty temper, and winning general esteem and affection by her straightforward honesty and simple good-nature.

Alice's resolutions were this time more lasting than usual. She kept a strict watch over herself for some time after receiving Lady Catharine's letter, and in this she was aided by the wish not only of doing rightly but also of gaining a good-conduct prize. Midsummer was approaching, and although she had not yet gained by any means the proper number of tickets, it was still possible to make up for past neglect. Alice began to be very diligent. She was up early in the morning, never allowed herself to play until her lessons were prepared, and gave little heed to Clara's ridicule. To have seen Alice at

Digitized by Google

that time one might have imagined that she was become a different person, steadily good, instead of being so only at intervals.

One morning, about three weeks after this improvement began, just as the lessons were over, Anna Grant burst into the room in her usual impetuous manner: 'Now, girls! hush!' but the noise continued. Ruth, who was taking advantage of a spare quarter of an hour to practise, left off playing, and said with an arch, quiet smile—

'You might as well talk to a hive of bees disturbed.'

'If they are bees, I will be a wasp,' replied Anna, and she spoke again, 'Hush! can't you?—Miss Barnard'—the name was a spell, and commanded instant attention.

'Miss Barnard sends word that we are to dine at four. Justine is coming.' There was a general exclamation of pleasure. 'All the lessons are to be over before dinner, and we are to walk afterwards.'

'That is what I call fun,' exclaimed Clara Manners; 'now for luncheon. Clear the long table, will you, Florence? it is your week.'

But Florence moved slowly. 'She did not see the good of Justine's coming so often. Justin was Mrs Carter's friend—not theirs.'

'I don't know about the good,' replied Clara: 'that is in Ruth's line; but Justine amuses one by the hour. Besides, I want to see her particularly.'

'Particularly! why? you have nothing to do with her more than any one else.'

Clara replied by taking up a book.

'Alice, here are your Italian exercises. Why don't you give her a careless mark, Flurry?'

'My name is not Flurry,' said Florence, in an offended tone.

'Well, Florence! most serene high-mightiness, Florence! why don't you do your duty better? And a verb book, too! Alice, what have you been thinking of?'

Alice came forward, and took the book. Her manner was so quiet that Clara was struck by it. She inquired what was the matter, laughed at her for being mopy, and then went back to provide herself with luncheon; Dawson having just brought in two large plates full of bread and butter, and bread and cheese, and Jessie O'Neile having a pot of preserves before her, a present from home, which she was upon the point of distributing to any one who asked.

Digitized by Google

'Ma foi! this jam is very good,' exclaimed Clara, as Jessie supplied her with her share.

'"Ma foi" is very vulgar,' observed Anna Grant. 'You should not say it, Clara.'

'Vulgar! Justine says it every day.'

'I don't know why that is a reason for its not being vulgar,' observed Anna; 'Justine has many odd ways.'

'And she says "O Ciel!" very often,' remarked Florence Trevelyan; 'why don't you say that too, Clara?'

'I would if I remembered it, but "ma foi" comes most naturally.'

'"Ma foi" is swearing,' said Janet Harding; 'my mamma never lets me say it, and I can tell a great many texts about it.'

'That is good!' exclaimed Clara; 'Listen, all of you, listen. Janet Harding knows a great many texts about "ma foi."'

Janet reddened and stammered, and declared that Clara was laughing at her.

'I do not mean to laugh; I am very grave; I want to hear the texts,' said Clara.

Janet began a text against swearing, but she was stopped in the middle by Anna Grant, who stated that she was not in the humour to hear texts, and begged that Janet would leave off. A general laugh followed at Janet's expense; and the little girl was obliged to return to her desk quite discomfited. Madeline saw her downcast look, and went up to her.

'It is no good, Janet,' she said. 'You will never make them listen to texts; and besides, you say such odd things. Justine is a lady, and ladies never swear.'

'Yes, they do,' replied Janet, 'and Justine says worse things than "O Ciel!" she says "Mon Dieu!"'

'But it is French,' said Madeline.

'Yes;' and Janet thought for an instant; 'but being French does not make any difference.'

'A great many of the others say "O Ciel,"' continued Madeline; 'Alice does.'

Alice looked up from the book she was reading.

'I never thought there was any harm in saying that in French.'

'It is harm, though,' replied Janet, nodding her head with an air of authority; 'and if you like, I will tell you all about it.'

Digitized by Google

'Thank you, said Alice, coolly; 'but I don't wish to know;' and she again began reading.

Just then Miss Barnard came into the school for the afternoon lessons.

As Madeline moved away, Alice heard Janet whisper that 'she was sure Lady Catharine could not have been strict with her, because she was not at all particular in her notions.'

This was an unfortunate speech for Alice to hear. She never liked Janet Harding. Janet's way of interfering, and giving opinions without being asked, was very disagreeable to her; and the reproof she had now received rankled in her mind. She would not allow that it was wrong to say 'O Ciel!' and as for its being swearing, the very notion of such a thing seemed ridiculous.

Justine's example, also, went a great way with Alice. Justine was a very pleasing-mannered girl, attracting attention not merely from her French dress and accent, but from her animation and good humour. She was not an old acquaintance. Monsieur Le Vergnier had only lately begun to teach in the school. He was a gentleman by birth, but very poor, and his daughter was to be educated for a governess. Both had been warmly recommended to Mrs Carter by persons whose opinion she valued. Justine, it was said, had received a strict, careful education; and what she now most required was a little acquaintance with English habits. English companions of her own age would be likely to give her this, and it would be an advantage to her for her whole life; and after considerable hesitation, Justine was invited to the house. It was remarked, that on the occasion of her visits, Mrs Carter sat more in the school-room herself, or kept Justine and the elder girls with her in the parlour; but beyond this no change was noticed, and only a few saw cause to imagine that any particular watch was maintained over the agreeable French stranger.

Justine came a little before the dinner-time, as usual, very nicely dressed, very lively, and affectionate and engaging in manner. Florence Trevelyan was seen at her side, admiring her collar, and asking for the pattern; and Alice felt quite angry with Janet Harding for having suggested that she had any bad habits. Alice was standing by herself whilst Justine was describing to Florence how the collar should be worked, when Janet came up to her, and said, in a quick under-tone, 'Now listen, Alice, listen! she does swear.'

Digitized by Google

A gentle 'Ah, mon Dieu!' escaped from Justine at this instant. Alice walked away without answering. She went into the dressing-room to prepare for dinner. Mary Vernon and Ruth were there: they were talking earnestly. Alice's countenance always showed when anything annoyed her, and Ruth, stopping in the middle of a sentence, asked, 'What was the matter?'

'Nothing,' answered Alice; 'only Janet makes me angry?'

'What about?' inquired Ruth.

'I cannot exactly tell; but it is her way; she sets herself up so; and she has no business to speak of Justine as she does. If Janet were to live a thousand years, she would never be half as good and nice as Justine; now would she?'

Ruth hesitated what to reply, and Alice saw her glance at Mary Vernon.

'You don't mean that you do not like Justine!' continued Alice, in surprise.

'No,' replied Mary; 'like her! every one must, for being agreeable; but, Alice, Ruth and I are not quite sure about other things,—more important things. I think she has different notions from ours.'

'Of course she has, because she has been educated in France.'

'But Mary spoke to her the other day about saying those solemn words, as she does,' observed Ruth; 'and she took it so oddly.'

'I daresay she was angry,' replied Alice; 'I am sure I should have been.'

'No, she was not at all angry, but she laughed and made a joke of it,' said Mary; 'and when we touched upon other serious things, going to church and so on, she did not seem to understand or care much about it. You know, Alice, that cannot be right.'

'She is French,' said Alice, 'and she speaks French.'

'But that does not alter the case. Things are wrong just the same, whether they are French or English.'

'I could say what Justine does much more easily in French than in English,' replied Alice.

'Yet you would be wrong, Alice, still,' observed Mary, in a gentle tone.

'And it is making such a fuss about a trifle,' continued Alice: 'after all, what Justine generally says is, "O heaven!" why is

Digitized by Google

there more harm in that than in "goodness" or "gracious,' and such words?'

'Are you sure that any of those expressions are right?' asked Mary.

'Oh! if you are as strict as that, Mary, you should never open your lips: and at any rate, I would rather be a little careless like Justine, than quote texts sharply like Janet Harding.'

'Why should you do either, dear Alice? Why should you not be like Ruth?'

Ruth's face crimsoned. Mary saw it, and said, as she kissed her and smiled, 'I did not mean to make you blush, Ruth.' Ruth blushed still more deeply, and Mary Vernon thought how nice it was to find one so good, so shy, and humble. Alice was never annoyed at being considered inferior to Ruth, and now she candidly allowed that Ruth was far beyond herself. 'In fact,' she said, 'it was impossible to think of being like her; she wished it very much, she often thought about it, but whenever she tried she went back and became just as bad as before.'

'Some things you can imitate easily,' said Mary. 'I do not think either Ruth or Madeline ever use those expressions.'

'Mamma always taught us not to do it,' said Ruth. 'She used to tell us that many of them were at first really swearing; that "goodness" meant the goodness of God, and "gracious" the same; and that it was better not to say anything of the kind.'

'We don't mean to swear,' observed Alice.

'But is it not safer,' asked Mary, 'to avoid the expressions altogether? Do you think that if Justine had been carefully taught not to say "O Ciel!" she would ever had used the more solemn words, "Mon Dieu!" as irreverently as she does?'

'Certainly that must be wrong,' said Alice, with an air of thought. 'I do wish Justine would leave it off.

'Then you will not be very angry with Janet for blaming her, will you?' said Mary, playfully.

'I am not angry with Janet; I do not care about her; but I wish she would not quote texts always.'

Mary's reply was stopped by the dinner bell.

That afternoon Justine and Clara set off for their walk together. Clara said she had engaged Justine the last time she

Digitized by Google

drank tea with them. Alice watched Justine to see if she liked the arrangement. It appeared she did, for she smiled sweetly, and was apparently amused at all Clara's odd sayings. But then Justine had the same agreeable manner for every one. They were just setting off, when Clara came to Alice and asked if she would join them in the park, when they were allowed to change their companions. Justine wished it particularly. Mary Vernon was close to Alice at the moment, and, interrupting more quickly than was her wont, she said—

'O Alice! I hoped you would have walked with Ruth and me; we were intending to ask you.' Then, in a still more beseeching tone, added, 'I so wish you would.'

'But we cannot spare her; we want her very much,' exclaimed Clara. 'Indeed, Alice, we must have you.'

'Mrs Carter is ready—waiting,' cried Jessie O'Neile.

There was no time to settle about the walking. They arranged themselves according to order, and set off. Alice and Janet Harding were forced to be together. Alice had never felt a greater aversion to Janet; she could not forget the morning's observation. Janet, however, was unconscious of any change, still less that she had given offence; and, speaking her thoughts aloud, she said, after a long silence—slowly, and as if the observation was the result of deep thought—

'School is not at all like home.'

'Who ever thought it was?' exclaimed Alice.

'No; it is not at all like home,' pursued Janet, in the same dreamy voice. 'I think my mamma would not have sent me to school if she had ever been there herself.'

'Your mamma is ill,' observed Alice, shortly; 'that is the reason you are sent to school, is it not?'

'Mamma said I should learn a great deal more at school than at home,' replied Janet; 'but I don't think I do learn at all more; and I am sure she would not like all the things we do here, and she would think Justine wicked.'

'You had better tell Justine so,' replied Alice.

'She would not care for what I said,' continued Janet: 'but mamma would think a great many of them wicked. She would like Madeline, because she is kind, and perhaps she would think Mary Vernon good, but she would not like any one else.'

'Then it is better for her not to come here,' said Alice.

'But they are wicked, Alice; because every one is wicked who is not very good.'

Digitized by Google

'And what do you call yourself, then, Janet?' said Alice.

'Oh, I am not good yet, but I shall be by and by.'

'I hope you will,' replied Alice; and falling back into silence, she continued without speaking till they reached the park.

Alice's thoughts were not likely to be of much service to her. They were very wandering, but principally she dwelt upon the contrast between Janet's awkwardness and abruptness, and Justine's agreeable, winning manner. Alice was much struck by manner at all times, and, feeling provoked with Janet, she was inclined to believe that she was unjust in her opinion of Justine. She even began to think that Mary Vernon must be either unjust or mistaken. They entered the park, and there was a general change of companions. Alice saw Mary and Ruth together. They appeared lingering for some one; she thought it must be for her. But Alice was not thoroughly in the humour to walk with them; she was too cross. Justine and Clara came behind her, and Justine said, in a sweet voice—

'Now, Alice, will you join us?'

'Of course she will. Why do you ask her?' said Clara.

Alice doubted what to answer. It was entirely against her resolution to walk with Clara. Justine repeated the request. Alice caught Janet Harding's eye, and knew what her thoughts must be. In a fit of contradiction she turned back, put her arm within Justine's, and left Janet to her own opinions.

Alice had seldom enjoyed a more agreeable walk. Justine was more than commonly amusing, and particularly attentive to Alice, whom she professed to like extremely. Clara was softened by Justine's gentleness, and Alice returned home more than ever inclined to believe Justine perfect. Certainly she did occasionally use startling expressions, but they did not sound as bad in French as in English; and, besides, Alice was less inclined to criticise them. It is astonishing how soon we become like those we are with. Alice's good principles and resolutions had gone back many degrees when the walk was over.

With the walk her pleasure for the day ended. She was behindhand with her lessons, and, when tea was over, she was obliged to go into the school-room to finish them. This was very tiresome, and Alice sat brooding over her work, and not putting her whole mind to it, till just as she had finished she

Digitized by Google

heard Monsieur Le Vergnier's knock at the door. Justine would not, she supposed, go immediately; at any rate, it would be pleasant to be with her, though only for a few minutes; and gathering up her books, Alice went into the closet to put them away. As she opened the door, some slates and copy-books, which had been carelessly piled up by one of the children, fell down, and in stooping to pick them up, Alice extinguished her candle. She was still trying to manage in the dark, when Clara and Justine came into the room with a light. They were talking, and did not notice that any one was behind the door. Alice heard Justine say—

'But why won't you subscribe at once?'

'Because we can't be quite sure of her yet,' replied Clara; 'she is so odd; sometimes she takes it into her head to be as good as Ruth, but she likes you, Justine, I am sure; and if I tell her the books are what you read, she will not think there is any harm in reading them also.'

'And what shall I do about this one which you want to see now?'

'Oh, bring it, bring it. We will manage it somehow. We can get into the dressing-room sometimes, on Sunday afternoon especially. Hark! there is Monsieur inquiring for you; we must be quick.'

Justine collected the few things which she had left in the school-room and departed. Alice remained behind perplexed and uncomfortable. She did not know what the conversation meant. She had not wished to listen to anything not intended for her ears, but there was an impression left upon her mind that something was to be done secret and wrong. And who could the 'she' be? Could it be herself? It was very probable. But then Justine never would do anything wrong. Mrs Carter, she believed, had a high opinion of her. Alice went into the dining-room. Clara and Justine were standing at the door.

'Where have you been?' asked Justine, in a tone of kind reproach.

'In the school-room,' answered Alice, 'finishing my lessons.'

'In the school-room!—you were not there just now,' exclaimed Clara, hastily.

'Yes I was—behind the door, putting up my books.'

'Then you heard—she must have heard,' said Clara, turning to Justine.

Digitized by Google

'I heard what you said, but I did not understand it.'

'Oh, no, to be sure she did not; it was all nonsense,' exclaimed Justine; 'but I must go, papa will be angry.'

'Stop one minute, Justine,' said Clara. 'Alice, you will promise Justine not to tell?'

'There is nothing to tell that I know of,' answered Alice.

'But you won't ask, you won't tease about it?' continued Clara. 'Justine, do make her promise, she will do anything for you.'

Justine heard her father speak impatiently. She began with a very irreverent exclamation. Alice shrank from the words for an instant: they gave her a painful feeling about Justine; but a warm French embrace, and a few words of endearment, won her heart, and she promised not to ask any questions until she was told that she might.

'You were right about Alice,' said Mary Vernon to Ruth, as they were wishing each other good night. 'I did not think she would have cared so much for being with Justine after what we said.'

'Alice likes any one who amuses her,' replied Ruth.

'Yes, I am afraid she does. O Ruth! if we could only make her like you!'

Ruth went to bed very happy. She thought over the events of the day. She could scarcely fix upon a single point in which she had really been negligent of her duty. And besides she had received high praise from Mary Vernon. Ruth knelt down to her prayers. Her attitude was very reverent: she seemed quite engrossed by the solemn duty she was performing. She rose and got into bed, without once breaking the rule for silence, which Anna Grant, who slept in her room, had sometimes great difficulty in enforcing upon the others. Every one felt respect for Ruth—Ruth respected herself.

Shall we look deeper into her heart? Ruth's thoughts before she went to sleep were those which had occupied her during her prayers. When she said the holy words, 'Our Father which art in Heaven,' she was thinking how glad she was that she was not like Justine; that she never used careless expressions; never took the name of God in vain. When she asked God to forgive her her trespasses, she was imagining what her papa and mamma would say when they heard she was held up as an example. When she prayed that God's name might be hallowed, she was fancying herself an object of admiration to the whole school.

Digitized by Google

Ruth went to bed satisfied. And is it possible then for any person so to fix his mind in prayer as never to allow his thoughts to wander? Does this habit of repeating holy words without attention, really partake of the nature of that sin which, whoever commits it, God has said, 'He will not hold him guiltless.'

Ruth did not think so, but she was wrong. God's holy name is taken in vain whenever it is mentioned without reverence; whenever we kneel before Him without a sense of His presence. All—even the best, at times do this; none are guiltless in the sight of God. But some try to fix their attention, some do not. God, 'who seeth the heart,' forgives the imperfection of the one, but He will assuredly punish the other.

CHAPTER XXII.

WEEKS at school pass very rapidly; every hour is occupied, and even those who are unhappy have scarcely time allowed them to think of their sorrow. There are sad moments, indeed; mournful thoughts, perhaps in the twilight, when the lessons are over, and conversation turns upon home and its pleasures; and tears sometimes shed in darkness when heads are laid upon the pillow waiting for sleep which does not at once come; but this is not the general state of feeling. Except under peculiar circumstances there is as much happiness to be found in a school as in any of the ordinary situations of life. The Sundays came round so quickly at Mrs Carter's, that the children could scarcely imagine it possible that six days had passed between them. Yet the weeks which elapsed after Madeline's misfortune with her text-book, seemed longer than usual, when she looked back upon them after the expiration of a month. She had thought more, tried more; she had made an advance in principle; and such times always make more impression upon us than common ones. The Sunday afternoons, however, when they arrived, did appear precisely the same. The elder girls went to Mrs Carter, the younger sat down to write their texts, Clara Manners was as thoughtless, Janet Harding as complaining as before. She summoned Madeline to help her, and mourned over school troubles and

Digitized by Google

difficult tasks, and Madeline sat by her, and pitied, and wrote; but she had learned something by what had happened. She took care of her own duty first, and Janet was obliged to wait till Madeline's texts were all properly finished, before she could obtain any assistance from her. This was a hint, and a very useful one, which Madeline had received from Mary Vernon. On the Sunday after Justine's visit, Janet's texts were brought to an end sooner than usual, and then her countenance cleared. She spoke of home, but it reminded her of pleasant things. She had received a basket of apples in the course of the week. It would be very nice to have some—who would like it? Every one, of course; and Janet went to ask permission to fetch them.

'Janet will be worth something by and by,' said Clara, 'she is not quite so much of a shrivelled codling as she was. I can't think what her papa and mamma can be like, to have made such a goose of her.'

'They have taken a great deal of pains with her,' replied Madeline.

'Then it is a pity they spent their time to so little purpose,' observed Clara. 'I never had a quarter of the trouble taken with me. They let me do just as I like at home.'

'Just as you like, Clara?' said Jessie O'Neile, coming up to the desk. 'You don't mean just as you like always.'

'Yes, just as I like, always, little Miss Particular. Why do you catch up my words?'

'Because I thought no one ever did just what they like, always. Ruth says so.'

'Then Ruth knows nothing about it. Now, just listen all of you, and I will tell you how I spend my Sundays at home. First of all, I take half an hour's grace in bed, which is particularly comfortable. Then I go down-stairs, and have buttered toast and coffee for breakfast. We always have toast on Sunday mornings. Then of course I have my best frock and bonnet to wear to church; and when I am ready, I go over to the house opposite, where a great friend of mine lives, Jane Price, and she and I walk off to church together. We go rather early because we can walk slowly and watch the people. Well! then comes church, much prettier singing than we have here, and a sermon not half as long—and after church I go with Jane to have luncheon, and we have great fun.'

'But what fun? fun on a Sunday!' asked Jessie.

Digitized by Google

'Do you play?' inquired Ellen Hastings.

'Nonsense, children! don't interrupt. You cannot understand. I tell you we have fun.'

'Yes, but is it talking?' asked Alice.

'What should it be but talking? We are not heathens. Jane tells me all she saw in church, all the odd figures. There is one man sits just opposite her pew—such a fright! Great red whiskers and a strawberry nose.'

The re-entrance of Janet interrupted Clara's details; the apples were produced and divided, and this for a time caused a change in the conversation, but Clara seemed bent upon returning to it. 'Well, after luncheon'—she began.

'Madeline,' said Ruth, calling her sister away, 'I wish you would come here, I want to speak to you.' Madeline went.

'I cannot bear to hear Clara going on in that wild way,' said Ruth, in an under-tone.

'Oh! why not? there is no harm, she is only telling us what she does on Sunday.'

'But there is no good in hearing, and Jessie and Ellen had much better be reading, and it is so silly of Alice to encourage her.'

'Speak to her,' said Madeline.

'It will be of no use, she will not listen; but I shall take the little ones away, and I wish you would not go there again.'

Alice's laugh was heard at this instant. Clara was telling something particularly amusing.

'You see how she's enjoying it,' said Ruth—'she likes Clara's nonsense.'

Ruth went to the closet, and brought out some books, and placing a stool by the long table, she made Jessie and Ellen sit down by her.

Madeline stood apart. She was not as sure as Ruth seemed to be, that Alice preferred Clara's conversation to that of any one else. Yet, it was true that Clara was very amusing. As Madeline listened, she heard her describe things at which it was almost impossible to help laughing. Tricks—unkind tricks, played off by herself and her friend Jane Price; still extremely absurd. Madeline had a strong impulse to hear more, and she drew near again.

They could not read all the afternoon, and the texts were finished, and she had always been taught that Sunday was a day for enjoyment. A question suggested itself to Madeline's mind.

Digitized by Google

Would her papa quite approve of the conversation? No, she was sure he would not. She would not like him to hear it, though she did not know exactly why. Madeline turned away and began to read.

'Why do you read, Maddy?' asked Alice, in a voice which betrayed some uncomfortable feeling.

'Because I had rather.'

'But don't read. Clara is telling such capital stories: come and listen.'

'Thank you, no, I had rather not; and I think Alice, Mrs Carter would like it best.'

'Mrs Carter does not mind our talking when we have written our texts,' said Alice.

'No, not some talking, but'——

'Never mind her; we do very well without her,' interrupted Clara. 'Let me see, where did I leave off?'

Alice went up to Madeline. 'What do you mean, Maddy? What is the harm of our talking?'

'I don't quite know, but it seems wrong, and Ruth does not like it, and I don't think papa and mamma and Lady Catharine would.'

'Don't you? but it is only telling true things; they are not stories.'

'Well, perhaps it is not wrong, but I had rather read.'

Perhaps it was not wrong—that was sufficient for Alice, and she went back again. Even Clara, however, could not be amusing for ever. Alice at last grew tired of her idle words, and could not laugh as heartily as before. She looked at Ruth, and felt irritated. Jessie O'Neile was leaning her head upon Ruth's shoulder listening to what she was saying, and little Ellen was holding her hand. They seemed quiet and good, and Ruth appeared to be taking a great deal of pains with them. Why should Alice have felt irritated? Alice yawned and thought that Sundays were long, dull days.

'That good Ruth!' said Clara, following the direction of Alice's glance, 'how she apes Mary Vernon!'

Alice could not bear to hear Clara speak of Ruth, and answered sharply, that 'she could not ape a better person.' 'For my part, I would not ape any one,' said Clara. 'I would rather be myself.'

'But what do you mean by Ruth's aping Mary Vernon?' asked Alice.

Digitized by Google

'Oh, that she sets up to be a piece of perfection, and won't have any fun, and that is what Mary does. She is as quiet as a church mouse on Sunday afternoons.'

Janet Harding, who had been sitting for some time silent without showing whether she was at all aware of what was going on, now joined in the conversation, and observed 'that she did not think Mary Vernon, or any of them, knew how to behave on Sundays.'

'Then please set us the example,' said Clara; 'we shall be quite proud to learn. What are we to do? Are we to say the Bible through from beginning to end?'

'We could not do that, you know,' replied Janet; 'there would not be time.'

'Well then! only half. Suppose you begin.'

Janet's face flushed. Don't laugh at her, Clara,' said Alice. 'I think she is better than we are.'

'Speak for yourself, Alice, if you please. Come, Janet, let us be edified by an account of your Sundays. I have given you an account of mine.'

Janet began, not without a tone of self-conceit. Her manner of keeping Sunday was quite the reverse of Clara's. It was very strict; with lessons to be learned from the Bible, and examinations, and scarcely anything in the shape of relaxation. Alice pitied her as she listened. Her thoughts went back to the Manor. Sunday was a day she liked; Lady Catharine seemed less stern; she seldom found fault with her, and tried to interest her by relating events which happened when she was a child; and Alice's time was fully occupied, for she taught a little class in the Sunday-school; and at home books were provided for her, kept especially for the day. Some were story-books, but of a grave kind, besides which, there was the pleasure of making tea herself, and enjoying the Sunday cake, and sitting up rather later: altogether, Alice had a very agreeable impression of Sunday at the Manor. Still she could not help allowing that Janet's notions were much better than Clara's. The misfortune was that Janet spoiled the effect of any right principle by her manner. She had been accustomed to talk religiously before she had learned to act. She was not insincere, but she was inconsistent; apt to profess herself, and to call upon others to profess likewise, much more than they were able to practise. This Alice saw and disliked. She stopped Janet quickly, as she was proceeding to speak, in a lecturing tone, of Clara's conduct, and said—

'Well, Janet, your way of spending Sunday may be very good

Digitized by Google

—I daresay it is; but there is no use in finding fault with every one else; and I know I should hate it.'

'That is because you are not good yet,' said Janet. 'I don't like it always, but I shall by and by.'

'Good or not good, it is very stupid work staying here to talk about it,' observed Clara. 'I wonder where Florence is.'

Florence just then came into the room with her sister. She went up to Clara and whispered to her, and Clara nodded her head, and said—

'Very well; directly;' and then Harriet and Florence went away again, and Clara almost immediately followed.

Alice was uncomfortable when Clara was gone. She wanted to be amused. She wished she could be like Ruth and Madeline, who were never dull; and, for want of something to do, she went to another desk, and joined in the same sort of conversation as before with others of her companions.

They grew very noisy, and Mary Vernon, who was writing at the table, several times asked them to be quiet. Ruth watched Alice, and thought again that she liked idle conversation, and that it would be no use to try and draw her into better habits. She seemed bent upon being careless and thoughtless. There was reading going on in the outer schoolroom. Miss Barnard was there; the door was closed, but Ruth remarked to Mary Vernon that she was sure the laughing would be heard; and she was right. Miss Barnard sent a message to insist upon perfect quietness. There was a lull in consequence, but loud whispering went on notwithstanding. Madeline still sat apart, reading or trying to read. Once she turned round, and asked Alice whether it was not her turn to go to Miss Barnard next for Scripture reading; because she had better find out the right chapter, and put a mark in. Alice only laughed, and said she should be quite in time, and Madeline returned to her book.

'Miss Barnard is ready for some more,' said Fanny Wilson, a short, bustling, good-natured girl, about thirteen years of age, coming in from the outer school-room. 'Whose turn is it?'

Ruth, Madeline, Alice, and Janet Harding, with two others, prepared to go.

'My Bible—I had my Bible!' exclaimed Alice. 'I wrote my texts from it. Who has taken it?'

No one knew: no one could think; and no one took the trouble to search.

'I am waiting,' said Miss Barnard, appearing at the door.

Digitized by Google

'Let me look over you, Maddy; it will do just as well,' said Alice.

'Yes, if you like it; but Miss Barnard will be sure to observe it. Where can your Bible be?'

Madeline tried to find it amongst a heap of books. Ruth grew impatient, and said they could not stay, and Alice was obliged to go without her Bible. The reading did not begin directly. Miss Barnard was called away, and they waited at least ten minutes. Then, to their surprise, instead of Miss Barnard came Mrs Carter. She wished to hear them read, she said, instead of her sister, who was particularly engaged. Ruth's face brightened extremely when she heard this. To read with Mrs Carter was a privilege generally reserved for the elder girls.

Alice also was pleased. Mrs Carter's eye was not as keen as Miss Barnard's. Probably she would not remark the absence of the Bible. They were reading in the first Book of Kings. Mrs Carter read the chapter, and afterwards questioned and talked to them about it. Alice felt she was safe from remark during reading, but when the questions began, and it was necessary to turn to references, she was uneasy.

'You will each find a text in turn, my dears,' said Mrs Carter. 'Ruth, you begin. But, Alice, you have no Bible.'

'I could not find it; I had it just before, but I could not find it,' replied Alice, blushing: 'and Madeline said I might look over her.'

'But that will not quite do. I wish you all to have Bibles of your own. Go and look again.'

Miss Barnard would probably have required a forfeit, and Alice thought that she had had a lucky escape.

'What was Alice doing that her Bible was not ready?' inquired Mrs Carter.

'Talking, ma'am,' replied Ruth.

'But that is no reason. Whom was she talking with?'

'There were several of us,' said Janet; 'I was talking too.'

Mrs Carter was a little grave for a few moments.

'I thought you all had your texts to do,' she said.

'Yes, ma'am, but we had finished—at least, some of us. Alice, I know, had.'

Alice had left the door between the two rooms ajar, and the whispering voices and laughter were more plainly heard. Mrs Carter made no further observations then. Alice having

Digitized by Google

found her Bible, brought it back, read the reference, and answered the questions. The examination upon the last verse in the chapter was made, and Mrs Carter was expected to say, 'Very well, my dears, now you may go;' but she did not say it. She fixed her eyes upon the book which lay open before her, and did not speak for some seconds; and when at length she looked up, her face wore the appearance of anxiety.

'My dears,' she said, 'it would give me great pleasure to feel that I could trust you always, out of my sight as in it. It would save me much care and trouble. Ruth, I think you are to be depended on.'

A faint smile of satisfaction stole over Ruth's face.

'But, Alice,' continued Mrs Carter, 'I am not so sure of you; and Janet, my dear, you have been strictly brought up. I trust you will not grow less careful here.'

'I try to remember the things mamma told me, ma'am,' said Janet.

'That is right. Always try and remember what your mamma tells you. But there are points on which, probably from not knowing your danger, she may not have warned you. One is about keeping the Sunday.'

'The girls do some things mamma would not let me do,' said Janet, very boldly.

'It is not so much the particular things which I am anxious about,' replied Mrs Carter, 'as the spirit of the day. It is God's day;—it is not at all like ordinary days; and this is what I am afraid many of you forget when you are left together. Ruth, find out the fifty-eighth chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah, and read the two last verses.'—'If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour Him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.'—When Ruth had finished, Mrs Carter said:—

'Now these are two very beautiful and striking verses; even if you do not understand every word you must feel that they are meant to express how the favour of the Almighty was shown to those who kept the Jewish sabbath strictly. But our Sunday is not the Jewish sabbath; it is the first day of

Digitized by Google

the week, not the last, and it is kept in remembrance of—what, Alice?'

'Of our Saviour's resurrection' replied Alice.

'Yes; it is a day of rest still, but it is a festival—a day of enjoyment; in commemoration of the most glorious event of our Lord's life; of that which gives us a sure and certain hope of a joyful resurrection also. If our Saviour had not risen from the dead, neither should we have had any hope of doing so. But as the day is especially our Saviour's day, as it is often called "the Lord's day," so must it especially be given to Him. Do you know, Janet, what I mean by giving Sunday to our Saviour?'

Janet hesitated, and then answered, that she supposed it was going to church, and saying prayers, and reading the Bible at home.

'It is quite right to do those things,' replied Mrs Carter, 'but they do not entirely make the distinction between Sunday and a common day, because we ought, if possible, to do them every day. Madeline, you have not spoken at all; perhaps you can explain what I mean a little more clearly.'

Madeline's colour mounted to her forehead, and it was in a low, doubtful tone that she asked, 'If it was thinking about our Saviour?'

'Right, partly,' observed Mrs Carter, encouragingly; 'but that is not all I wished to say. You know what it is to keep a birthday. The person whose birthday it is, is the one object—the great person of the day. We are constantly thinking what he will like; how we can please him: his wishes are consulted, and if we forget for a little while, we are always meeting with something to remind us of him. Now, our feeling on a Sunday should be of the same kind. Do you think it is?'

There was silence.

'I am afraid, generally speaking, it is not,' continued Mrs Carter; 'especially when we have been to church, and return home, and join in common conversation, I am afraid we all are apt to forget that it is the Lord's day. We make it our own day by talking of business and lessons, and indulging in idle jesting, perhaps about what was seen or done in church.'

'Mamma never told me I must not talk,' said Janet.

'Neither do I, my dear child,' replied Mrs Carter, smiling. 'We cannot be reading and praying all day; even the very best persons cannot; and we cannot think for a whole day about religion. There is no harm whatever in quiet, cheerful conversa-

Digitized by Google

tion, or in real friends meeting together; and there is no harm in reading other books besides the Bible, as long as they are such as will help to make us more religious; but there is harm in turning our minds to business or worldly pursuits; in your troubling yourselves about your week's lessons, for instance; or in grown-up persons settling accounts, or arranging their affairs; and there is harm in idle, laughing conversation, which may prevent us from being serious and properly behaved at church. This is the conversation which I am afraid you are apt to indulge in. I do not ask you whether you are; but I warn you against it as wrong.'

'Clara Manners told us how she spent her Sundays,' said Janet, 'and I told how I spent mine; I did not know it was wrong.'

'My dear Janet,' replied Mrs Carter, 'it is impossible for me or for any person to decide in every particular case what is wrong or not. I can only give you general advice as to the subjects you should not talk about, and the things which you should not do. But one thing I will say to you all. Sunday is a day for religion. When we are entirely religious in our inmost hearts, we shall thoroughly enjoy it. Until we are so, there are times when it will seem dull to us—when it will be a burden to go to church, and very tiresome not to be able to amuse ourselves as we do on other days. This will be our fault. The only way to remedy it, is to try to be more religious, to love and serve God more. And remember, it is much better to be too particular than not particular enough. If, whilst you are at school, you will try to remember the day, by occupying yourselves quietly, rather than talking idly; reading the books which I choose for you, rather than your own story books; and never indulging in ridicule of serious things, such as the manner in which the service is performed, the sermon, or the clergyman, or anything which may appear strange to you in church, you will certainly become more religious, and the duties which are now a burden will be a pleasure to you. We begin by being strict when we do not like to be so, because it is our duty. We end by discovering that strictness has brought us to happiness. My dear children, God grant that you may one day find it so.'

Mrs Carter rose and closed her book. It was the signal for departure. Madeline, Alice, and Janet went first. Mrs Carter called Ruth back as she was following them, and kissing her, said: 'Ruth, that is one of the points on which you may set a good example, and be of great use to me when Mary is gone.'

Digitized by Google

Ruth grew a little nervous and shy, but promised that she would do her best, and then returned to the school-room.

Alice did not go back to her former companions. Mrs Carter's kind remarks touched her conscience more than any reproofs. She meant to read, but she was interrupted. Ruth repeated what had passed, not in an authoritative tone, as Anna Grant would have done, but quietly and humbly, so as not to give offence. Then she took her former place at the table. If she was self-satisfied, her manner did not betray it.

'Well, if we must not talk, I should like to know what we may do,' said Fanny Wilson; 'I shall go into the garden.'

'You must ask first, Fanny,' said Janet.

'Yes, but I am afraid; I never ask if I can help it. Alice, you are bold—will you ask?'

'I do not wish to go into the garden,' said Alice.

'Oh! but just ask; if you don't go yourself, ask for us; please do. Or, Madeline, perhaps you will.'

'Madeline is not here,' said Jessie O'Neile. 'She is gone into the dressing-room with a book.'

'Then, Alice, do be good-natured.'

'I do not like asking, any more than you do, Fanny,' answered Alice:—'however, I suppose I must,'—and she went. She passed the dressing-room door on her way to the study. Madeline was there, but she was not alone, for several voices met Alice's ear. 'Now what is it? do tell me,' she heard Madeline say, and upon opening the door from curiosity, Madeline turned round, exclaiming: 'Here is Alice, now she will make you tell. Alice, they have a secret; do help find it out.'

'Try, try, you are very welcome,' said Clara Manners.

'I have known they have had a secret some time,' observed Alice; 'but they would not let me into it.'

'And you sleeping in the same room?' cried Madeline. 'What a shame!'

'Now, Maddy, take my advice,' said Clara; 'you are a good, little, simple thing; don't wish to be any wiser—just let me go my way, and you go yours.'

'Then you mean to tell Alice?' inquired Madeline.

'Never mind what we mean to do; only go away, and leave us to ourselves.'

'I came here to read,' continued Madeline; 'because there is always so much talking in the school-room.'

Digitized by Google

'Well, then! you see that you came to no purpose. We are here before you.'

'Some of them are going into the garden,' observed Alice. 'I am to ask Mrs Carter if they may; and then the school-room will be quite quiet.'

'No, no, Alice, you stay here,' said Clara; 'and, Maddy, you are always good-natured; you will go, I am sure.' 'And let Alice hear the secret?' replied Madeline, feeling a little angry and very curious. Some one opened the door quietly; it was Ruth, come to look for Madeline. Mary Vernon was reading such an interesting book, she was certain her sister would like to hear it. 'And Mary thought you would like it too, Alice,' she added.

Madeline promised she would come directly; and Ruth closed the door, but in an instant re-opened it.

'Madeline, Mary said particularly she wished you to come: she wants you very much.'

'I will come in one minute; only one minute.' Ruth was gone. Madeline felt that she ought to follow her—but her curiosity was great. Perhaps, if she asked again, Clara would tell her the secret. Madeline stood in a musing attitude, whilst Clara, Florence, and Harriet whispered together; and Alice waited, under the idea that Madeline was deciding whether she would go to Mrs Carter or not.

Alice took up a book which was lying on a chair. 'Madeline,' she said, 'this is your book; how could it come here?'

It was Madeline's Bible. She had brought it in by mistake. The circumstance seemed quite accidental—but it recalled a serious thought to Madeline's mind. It made her think of her prayers; especially her few short prayers in that room, and her good resolutions, and Mrs Carter's warnings. She turned the handle of the door, and said: 'Alice, I will go to Mrs Carter if you wish it; but won't you come back to the school-room? Mary and Ruth say we had better.'

'No, stay, stay,' whispered Clara.

'And you shall hear the secret,' said Harriet in the same tone.

Alice wavered. 'I will come presently, Madeline; don't wait for me.'

'But, Alice! you would like to be with Ruth and Mary.'

'Yes, very much; I will come!' Alice had better thoughts also, of the advice she had just received, and of Lady Catharine,

Digitized by Google

and her mamma, and her own wishes to be good. 'I will really come, Madeline; but don't wait.'

It seemed of no consequence whether Alice stayed a minute longer or not. Madeline went to Mrs Carter; permission was given for those who liked it to go into the garden. Ruth, Madeline, and Mary Vernon spent the next half-hour together. Then all were summoned to tea; and the last of the party who entered the dining-room, looking hurried and uncomfortable, were Clara, Alice, and Florence and Harriet Trevelyan.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A WARM, bright morning, at the end of May, was almost as pleasant in the neighbourhood of London as in the country. The leaves upon the large tree in the centre of the garden were about to burst into full beauty; the turf was as yet quite green; the gravel walk had been newly trimmed, and there were early flowers in the borders, with colours as brilliant as if they had been born hundreds of miles from the smoke and dust of a crowded city. Ruth stood at the window, and looked up into the soft blue heaven. How calm and pure it was! how free from change! It seemed as if the eye could travel on and on, higher and higher, farther and farther into its depth, and never meet with check or obstacle. It was something which had no end. Ruth's heart felt light. The bird which crossed the sky, a speck in the dazzling sunshine, gone almost as soon as seen, was not more free from thoughts of care. Ruth was enjoying the freedom and delight of a school holiday. It was Mrs Carter's birthday. There were no lessons, no masters. She was to do as she pleased all day. Ruth had not quite made up her mind what her pleasure would be; but she was happy. For a time it was enjoyment enough to sit upon the window-seat in the warmth of the sun, and watch the whirling of the insects in the garden, and mark the different colours of the flowers, and listen first to the clear, thrilling song of a bird amongst the shrubs, and then turn from it to the heavy, rumbling, unceasing sound of the succession of carriages, and omnibuses, and the hundreds of human beings, who were passing to and fro on the great road which led into the very heart of London.

Digitized by Google

Mrs Carter came into the room, and Miss Barnard with her. They had both a peculiar holiday smile, though Mrs Carter's was by far the sweeter of the two. Ruth was never afraid of seeing Mrs Carter, especially on a holiday; she was not conscious of having anything to conceal. She sat still in the same position, for she did not imagine that Mrs Carter could have business with her. But she heard her name called. She was wanted, and Alice and Madeline, Mary Vernon, Clara, Janet, Jessie, and one or two others. What could it be for? Mrs Carter looked as persons often look when they are certain of giving pleasure.

'My dears,' she said—and then she glanced around, and smiled still more kindly: but why did she not speak a little quicker? Ruth longed for the words to come—'My dears, this is a holiday. I should like to give you some amusement—at least, some of you.'

'Thank you, ma'am;' but they were all too impatient to be very cordial.

'I have been thinking of a party to Richmond.' Madeline nearly jumped with delight. 'I believe none of you have been there—none of you, I mean, whom I have named. Have any of you?'

No, not one; they had all been longing to go for a great while, but they had never had the opportunity.

'Well, then! I cannot take all the school—only a few; those who did not go the last time, or who were not here; and the others must enjoy themselves as well as they can at home.'

Bright as the sun had appeared to Ruth before, it was tenfold more bright now. The thanks were not very loud and a little constrained. It is more difficult to receive a favour well than to bestow it. But Mrs Carter did not want words. She knew well the pleasure she was giving, and left them, after begging they would prepare immediately; for they must drive into London, and go down to Richmond by one of the river steamers. Miss Barnard remained in the school-room for a few minutes, and relaxing from her usual severity, wished to know what she could do for those who were to stay behind; how she could assist them in amusing themselves. Mrs Carter had no objection to their choosing a book from the study to read aloud, if they liked it; and if they wished for any working materials—lambs' wool, crochet needles, cardboard, silks—anything in short—Dawson should go out and execute the commission. Also,

Digitized by Google

the agreeable facts were announced, that the cook had made a large cake for the evening, and that the fruit-woman had been ordered to call, in case any of them should like to buy of her.

'Ours is the best school in London, I protest it is,' said Fanny Wilson, as she seated herself upon the top of her desk, and looked round with an air of great satisfaction. 'But who is going to Richmond? You, Ruth, and Madeline, and Clara, and who else?'

'Alice,' added Clara, 'and Jessie, and—but I don't know who; every one must take care of herself. Now, Alice, you and I will go and dress.'

'We must all go,' observed Madeline.

'Yes, of course; but all is not my concern. Come, Alice.' Alice did not follow.

'Maddy, you be my friend for the day,' said Janet Harding.

'Well, yes, if I can—certainly I will.'

'And, Ruth, shall I walk with you?' inquired Alice.

'No, no, no, Alice; I am to have Ruth,' exclaimed Jessie; and she seized Ruth's hand in both hers. 'My dear, darling Ruth, I am to have her all day, all to myself. Alice, indeed you can't.'

'I think I must have Jessie,' said Ruth, in a very kind voice. 'You know, Alice, she is so little.'

Jessie clung to her, and said, 'Dear, darling Ruth,' again.

It was very winning in her. Alice spoke not another word. She put a few stray things into her desk, locked it, and went to dress.

It is a cheerful, pleasant thing to catch the first glimpse of the river Thames, as it flows through London, crowded with steamers, barges, fishing-boats, and little pleasure skiffs, so narrow and light that they seem scarcely able to bear the weight of a single person; but it is still more pleasant to escape from the whirl and confusion of shipping and business, the loading and unloading of vessels at the wharves, the calling of porters and passengers, and the ringing of bells, and, after passing under the high, dark arches of the different bridges, to emerge again into the free air; and by degrees leaving the long lines of warehouses and narrow streets which border the river, to reach the open country, and see fields and hedgerows shining fresh and green in the morning light, and watch the flickering reflections of dark trees, floating, as it seems, underneath the cool, clear

Digitized by Google

water of the river, and blending with the transparent blue of the cloudless sky.

This was a pleasure such as Ruth had never enjoyed before. Even the open sea at Laneton scarcely seemed as delightful, for the coast was not very safe, and in consequence they scarcely ever went on the water. And at Ruth's age there was a particular charm in the life and cheerfulness of everything about her. The banks of the river were enlivened by villas and gardens, and fine trees ornamented the large park like fields. Ruth was not inclined to find fault with the numerous houses, and when they came to large villages, which Mrs Carter said seemed like the suburbs of London, Ruth fancied that she was speaking rather in their praise than not. Everything on this day, from the hot steam-packet to the long walk after they landed, was agreeable to her. Only one of the party appeared not thoroughly happy. Alice sat by Clara Manners, but she did not enter into her jokes. She was listless and silent. Mrs Carter remarked it, and inquired if she had a headache. But no, Alice was quite well; she made no complaints of any kind; though she looked at Jessie O'Neile with something of an envious eye. Yet when the seat by Ruth was afterwards left vacant, she did not offer to take it.

'You will keep in order, my dears, in walking through the town,' said Mrs Carter, when they reached Richmond. 'Now go, one by one; don't be in a hurry.'

The landing occupied but a few minutes, and then, whilst Mrs Carter was giving some instructions to a servant, they divided into pairs according to the direction. There was an uneven number. Alice kept back; she thought it would be pleasant to walk with Mrs Carter, and she intended to ask.

Clara Manners came up to claim her.

'Alice, you know you and I are to be friends to-day.'

'No, Clara, I never said so. I never promised to walk with you.'

'Oh! yes, you did. I understood so; and what do you want to do else?'

'I should like to walk with Mrs Carter.'

'Walk with Mrs Carter! what a good little child! Jessie O'Neile likes walking with Mrs Carter; she tells her pretty stories.'

'I do not wish to hear stories,' said Alice.

'Only to learn to be prim. My brother Charles says there

Digitized by Google

is not such another prim old lady in England. He always calls her the Kensington Primer.' Alice laughed.

'Look at her, just look at her now,' said Clara, 'bowing and curtseying to that woman with a purple shawl. I declare they are a capital match. Now again there is the bow. See Alice—this way,' and Clara gave an exaggerated imitation of Mrs Carter's bow.

'Hush, Clara, be quiet, do; people will see you.'

'I don't care; why should I? We are told to follow our superiors. Now, my dears, hold up your heads, walk properly, straight on.'

The manner was so like Mrs Carter's, that all who were near smiled, and the smile encouraged Clara to proceed.

'What a time she is coming! what can they be saying? Such heaps of good-byes! and kisses! I protest she is kissing that baby. That is because some day, she thinks, it will come to school. I know that is the reason.'

'Well! and if it is, where is the harm?' said Alice.

'No harm; who said there was harm? I would kiss babies all day long if I thought I was to get so much money for it.'

The kiss to the baby was the farewell greeting between Mrs Carter and her friend.

The lady in the purple shawl pursued her way over Richmond Bridge, and Mrs Carter came back to her young party, telling them that she was really sorry to have delayed them so long, but that she had just met with a friend whom she had not seen before for two years. Now, they were to go through the street, and then turn to the left up the hill. A lady living near, one who had formerly been a pupil of Mrs Carter's, was wishing to see them; they were to dine at her house. Those who were in advance moved on. Mrs Carter was standing alone. Alice thought of her intended request, but the wish to walk with Mrs Carter was over. Clara took her arm as a matter of course, and Alice went with her.

The High Street of Richmond was not very tempting after Regent Street, but it was a novelty, and that did just as well; and besides it was not crowded, and therefore more agreeable for walking; and, as they proceeded, there were views of the river and the opposite banks, very fresh and lovely and unlike London.

Janet Harding found a little cause for complaint in the idea of going amongst strangers, but she was reassured by Madeline's

Digitized by Google

reminding her that Mrs Vansittart had been at school herself, and therefore must know all about school-girls. Then the tone of her voice grew more cheerful, and she acknowledged, as they stood at the gate, nearly at the summit of Richmond Hill, that it did look as if the grounds within the palings must be extremely pretty.

But there was a disappointment in store for them, at least for Mrs Carter. Mrs Vansittart had been sent for that morning to see an aunt who was ill. No one was at home to receive them; but a cold dinner was prepared, and a note was left for Mrs Carter, begging her to make use of the house as if it were her own. Janet Harding thought the arrangement a fortunate one, and Mrs Carter alone was really sorry, for Mrs Vansittart had been a favourite pupil. If the annoyance had been on the part of the children, the pleasure of the whole party might have been spoiled; but Mrs Carter was thoroughly unselfish, and never allowed her own vexation to interfere with the happiness of others.

The house—a large, square, brick building, with stone facings—was not particularly picturesque; but it stood in a beautiful garden, from which might be seen the steep fields leading down to the town, and the long reach of the river gliding onwards through the meadows, and losing itself amidst the richness of the distant country, which stretched mile after mile towards the far horizon, becoming softer and more purple in its hues as trees, and houses, and hills blended their outlines and their colouring together, until all were mingled at last in a faint, blue misty shadow, scarcely distinguishable from the vapoury sky. Ruth sat alone for some time on a pleasant seat overlooking the lovely landscape. She was not inclined for play; she never was when enjoying very beautiful scenery. The sight of it made her quiet—it might almost have been termed sad; but the sadness was so pleasant she would not have exchanged it for mirth.

A gentle footstep was heard, and Madeline, as she sat down beside her sister, said—

'Is it prettier than Laneton, Ruth?'

'I don't know; I think it must be. How far we can see! Look! quite away. Mrs Carter says that Windsor is out there.'

'I like it—I like it very much—very much indeed,' said Madeline; 'but I don't want it to be prettier than Laneton.'

Digitized by Google

'I would rather live at Laneton,' replied Ruth, 'and so would papa and mamma; because of all the poor people, and the church, and the sea.'

'And it is very pretty, is it not,' continued Madeline, 'down on the shore when the tide is coming in, with the rocks and the cliffs? I wish mamma could see this, and tell us which is the prettiest.'

'Mamma would be very glad to be here to-day,' said Ruth. 'I should be so glad if she was, and dear papa too.'

'I always think about home on holidays,' observed Madeline, 'more than I do on any other days, because I am not so busy. But do you know, Ruth, I don't think some of the girls care much about their homes. Clara Manners does not.'

A burst of laughter reached them just at that moment. Clara's voice was heard very distinctly.

'Now, my dears, proceed slowly. Hold up you head, Alice;' and, with another shout of laughter, a little procession, walking two and two, came up the path which led from the lower part of the garden. Jessie O'Neile headed it.

'They are mimicking Mrs Carter—how very wrong!' exclaimed Ruth; 'and she will see them. How can Clara do such things!'

'And Alice is there,' said Madeline. 'I wonder she joins.'

'Jessie—Jessie!' called out Ruth.

'Fair play, Ruth,' exclaimed Clara; 'I won't have my scholars taken from me. Now, my dears, toes turned out, shoulders down.'

'Jessie, that is very naughty. Come to me,' said Ruth again.

The child stopped, and immediately the rest of the party stopped too.

'Clara, you know you ought not—you know it as well as I do,' said Ruth, going up to her.

'Know what? That there is any harm in walking round the garden? We were told to do it. Don't stop us, if you please. On, my dears, on. We have no time to lose.'

Clara was an excellent mimic, and Ruth had real difficulty in keeping her countenance. She caught Jessie's frock.

'Come to me, Jessie; don't stay with them. Come to me, I want to talk to you.' Jessie left her companion, and followed Ruth. Alice looked after her, and stepped aside as if she would have turned back also. Ruth took no notice, but Clara ran up

Digitized by Google

to her, and said: 'Alice, don't go; it is only Ruth's nonsense. There can't be any harm in having a little fun;' and Alice moved on. But there were no more shouts of laughter—at least Alice did not join in them; and after again making the round of the garden, Alice stepped away from the party unperceived, and wandered into a walk by herself; a quiet, shady walk, with the shrubs growing high enough to conceal any one who might be there. Why did this pleasant, bright day make Alice sad? Why was her mirth so little from the heart? How was it that those whose society she cared for thought little about her, and those whom she never could respect were always forcing themselves into her company? Alice deemed herself very unfortunate; and again she said, as she had so often done before, that it was in vain to try to be good; in vain to think of pleasing Lady Catharine; in vain to endeavour to be like her dear mamma: because she was placed by circumstances with those who were always doing wrong. If Ruth were fond of her, if Mary Vernon would notice her, if she did not sleep in the same room and sit at the same desk with Clara Manners, she might be better; but, now, it was impossible.

Alice walked till she was tired, but she would not go to the bench where Ruth and Madeline were, for she felt ashamed. The trunk of a fallen tree lay stretched across the path, and she sat down on it to rest. Her heart was heavy, for her conscience was uneasy. How long she sat there she did not think. It was quiet and warm, and Alice did not wish to be interrupted. Sad though her thoughts were, she liked better to indulge them than to join in mirth which she did not feel. Alice sometimes pondered very seriously upon what life really was; how strange it was; how wonderful that she should be able to live and move, and converse, and think; how wonderful that trees should grow, and flowers blossom, and the sun shine, and the wind blow; how still more wonderful and awful, that such numbers and numbers of persons should have dwelt upon earth since it was created; that they should have lived the same sort of life which she was then living, and now that they should all be gone—gone, no one knew where—gone either to happiness or misery. It was very awful! Alice was not at all happy when the idea came before her, for her faults came also.

She was still thinking, when Mary Vernon came into the walk. Mary did not perceive Alice until she was quite close to her, and then she started and said—

Digitized by Google

'Alice, you here alone!'

'Yes,' replied Alice, 'I am tired.'

'Are you? but why did you run about when you knew we were to have a long walk after dinner?'

'We did not run, we only walked,' replied Alice.

'Then you were with Clara,' said Mary, not without some hesitation.

'Yes, for a little while. Why do you ask?'

'Because, Alice, I wish you would not do what Clara tells you.'

'She asks me, she does not tell me,' said Alice.

'Well, asking or telling, it is very much the same. You do the things.'

'Not all,' replied Alice, 'and often I don't wish to do them; but I cannot help it.'

'Are you sure of that, dear Alice? This morning, for instance.'

Mary spoke very mildly, but Alice felt angry.

'This morning was all nonsense, Mary. I daresay Ruth has been talking to you about it; but really she makes such mountains out of molehills, that it is quite absurd.'

'Ruth told me, certainly,' replied Mary; 'but I cannot perceive there was anything absurd in what she said. She mentioned that several of you had been laughing at Mrs Carter.'

'Not laughing at her, herself; only at her odd ways.'

'But that must be laughing at herself. Her ways are a part of herself.'

'And if they are absurd they must be laughed at,' persisted Alice.'

'Not by you, nor by me, Alice,' replied Mary, very gravely. 'We are placed under her: we are in a manner her children.'

'I don't see that,' said Alice.

'Who takes care of us here? Who teaches us? Whom are we bound to obey?' inquired Mary.

'Oh! Mrs Carter, of course; but, Mary, there must be a great difference. If I had a mamma,' and Alice's voice faltered, 'I should never laugh at her.'

'But you would not obey and honour her, I am afraid,' continued Mary.

'Not honour her! Oh! yes, Mary; you don't know what my mamma was like.'

'Ruth says she was very good indeed,' answered Mary; 'and

Digitized by Google

I am quite sure, in that case, that she would never bear your being disrespectful.'

Alice became suddenly thoughtful.

'I did not mean to be irreverent,' she said, at length, with greater softness of manner.

'But, dear Alice, can you not understand that all persons who are put over us—whether they are parents, or clergymen, or governesses—are put over us by God; and therefore we are not to ask whether we like them, but we are to obey and show them reverence, because it is His will. And you know, only yesterday, we were told in the sermon at church, that when we are commanded to "honour our father and mother," it means that we are to pay respect to all persons who have authority over us.'

'I am always respectful when I speak to Mrs Carter,' said Alice.

'But, Alice, you would not like to be a hypocrite.'

'A hypocrite! No, how shocking!'

'Yet if you honour Mrs Carter before her face, and mimic her behind her back, it is something very like hypocrisy.'

'I should not do it, if Clara did not begin,' said Alice.

'And do you always mean to follow what Clara begins,' asked Mary.

'I do not mean anything,' exclaimed Alice, impatiently. 'I do just what comes in my way; but if you think it is wrong to mimic Mrs Carter, I will not do it again.'

Alice rose from her seat, and would have walked away, but Mary detained her.

'Alice, dear, you are angry with me. I am extremely sorry.'

Mary's humble tone struck Alice as a reproach for her hastiness.

'I am very naughty, Mary,' she said, turning round, whilst tears filled her eyes; 'but I cannot help it. I do really wish to be good, and I won't mimic Mrs Carter any more.'

'And, Alice, will you try to keep away from Clara Manners?'

'If I can; I will do anything I can: but no one cares for me—no one ever wishes to be with me.'

'Yes, I wish it; and Ruth.'

'No, indeed, Ruth never does; she would not have me to-day to walk with her. I know why it is; I am not good enough for her.'

'And can you ever become better by being with Clara Manners?'

Digitized by Google

'No; but I sleep in the same room, and sit at the same desk, and so I must be with her.'

'It is very hard,' said Mary, half speaking to herself. 'But, Alice, she added, 'if you were to endeavour not to follow Clara's ways, if you were to say you did not like them, then Ruth and those who are steady would try to have you with them. But they see you laughing with Clara, and then they think you prefer her company. Any one instance in which you would stand aloof from Clara would be a beginning, and make them wish more to be with you. So you see it is in your own power.'

Alice remained silent.

'You will try, won't you, dear Alice?' continued Mary; 'and especially about mimicking and ridiculing. You know how Clara laughs at the clergyman, and it always gives me such pain to hear her; it is so extremely wrong.'

'I do think laughing at clergymen is wrong,' said Alice.

'Yet you laugh with Clara, and encourage her; you do not try to stop her.'

'If I could think about it at the time,' continued Alice; 'but I forget.'

'It must be of great consequence to be particular,' said Mary; 'because the commandment about paying honour is the first which has a promise with it.'

'That promise was to the Jews,' replied Alice; 'there is no land for us to live long in.'

'Only heaven,' said Mary, quietly, but very solemnly.

Alice looked at her earnestly.

'Mary,' she said, 'I wish I was as sure of going to heaven as you are.'

'O Alice!' exclaimed Mary, 'how can I possibly be sure of it? Persons who are ever so good are not sure; but I should be glad to feel that I was trying to make myself fit for it; and I was told once, that a very good way of trying is by being reverent and showing respect, because then we are always reminded of having some one above us.'

'I do respect people very much,' said Alice. 'I respect Mrs Carter, and a great many people; but I cannot help laughing at them when Clara is so absurd, though I am always sorry afterwards.'

Mary looked vexed and puzzled. She was not accustomed to meet with a character like Alice's—one which could so plainly see the right, and yet so constantly follow the wrong. She was not able to pursue the conversation, for they were interrupted

Digitized by Google

by Ruth, who had been looking for Mary to go into dinner with her.

Ruth seemed surprised at finding Mary and Alice together, but she asked no questions; and Alice immediately felt herself thrown into the background, when she saw that Ruth took it as a matter of course that Mary would like being with her rather than with any one else.

'Now, Jessie, will you be my little companion through the park?' said Mrs Carter, when the dinner was over, and the party collected in the hall prepared for their walk. Jessie ran up to Mrs Carter, and took possession of one hand. Alice had an inclination to go to the other side. Mrs Carter noticed the direction of her glance.

'Alice, my dear,' she said, 'you and I have not had a walk together for some time: will you come, if you have not promised any of your companions?' Alice coloured and looked pleased.

'You can't, you are engaged,' whispered Clara Manners behind her.

'Never mind, my dear,' continued Mrs Carter, seeing Alice's hesitation; 'I merely thought you were not engaged.'

Alice blushed more deeply.

'Turn out your toes, hold up your head, my dear,' mimicked Clara, in a very low whisper.

The corners of Alice's mouth worked with repressed laughter.

'Are you engaged?' asked Mrs Carter, still more kindly.

'Kensington Primer,' whispered Clara.

Alice at length found a voice to answer—

'I—I don't know, ma'am; I thought'—she looked round for Clara, who came forward boldly.

'Alice is engaged to me, ma'am.'

'Oh! very well. Why did you not say so at once, my love?'

'Then may I walk with you, ma'am?' inquired Ruth, coming forward. Mrs Carter smiled, held out her hand, and gave the order to proceed.

There are many lovely walks in Richmond Park, along the broad terrace looking over the river, and by the enclosed gardens of the few houses which are built in the Park; and farther away, in the more retired parts, where the grass is unworn save by the tread of the deer scattered about amongst the branching oaks; and fern, and heath, and wild flowers, cause one quite to

Digitized by Google

forget that within but a few miles lies the dense mass of houses, churches, and public buildings, which form the largest city now in the world.

'It is very pleasant, Alice, is it not?' said Madeline, as they waited for a few moments not to lose sight of Mrs Carter, who was walking slowly behind.

'Yes, very—very pretty indeed. But, Clara'—and Alice turned away from Madeline as she spoke—'I don't understand what you are saying.'

'Hush! can't you?' exclaimed Clara, drawing her aside. 'Alice, I never will tell you anything, if you are so foolish.'

'Oh! Madeline would not know; she never listens.'

'But I am sure she would know; she is as sharp as a needle on some points, and I would not tell her or Ruth for the world.'

'Then why tell me? I don't wish to hear.'

'Nonsense, Alice; you must hear. You sleep in our room, and you must; besides, you cannot help yourself. You know that book we were reading the other Sunday in the dressing-room?'

'Yes. We finished it, I thought.'

'So we did; but we can get some more. Shouldn't you like it?'

'Perhaps—I am not sure. Mrs Carter does not choose us to read books without her seeing them.'

'Oh, nonsense! there is no harm in the book. You did not hear any, did you?'

'It was very amusing,' replied Alice, in a doubtful tone, 'but we ought not to have read it on a Sunday.'

'Well, perhaps we ought not; we need not do it again.—But on other days. Justine can get us as many as we like; only we must keep the matter to ourselves, and read them carefully when we have a few minutes to spare in the day, and a little at night, if we are quick in undressing.'

'I don't wish to have anything to do with it,' said Alice. 'I thought the other day it was very wrong in us to read story books in the dressing-room on a Sunday.'

'On a Sunday! How you will persist in talking about Sunday,' replied Clara. 'We need never do it again on a Sunday.'

'But on any day I had rather not.'

Clara's countenance expressed great surprise.

Digitized by Google

'Why, Alice, what have you been doing? What has made you so particular all of a sudden?'

'It is not of a sudden,' replied Alice, not choosing to acknowledge the influence of Mary Vernon's conversation. 'I have been sorry for what I did on that Sunday ever since!'

'Sunday again!' repeated Clara, impatiently. 'You shall engage, if you like, never to read them except on common days. Justine will bring them, and we can enjoy them quietly at night when we go to bed.'

'If they are Justine's books, they will be French,' said Alice; 'and I cannot read French easily without a dictionary.'

'They are not French,' answered Clara; 'they are English. Justine reads them in French, but she can get translations for us; only, we must all subscribe.'

'Then it is no use to talk to me,' said Alice; 'I cannot afford it.'

'You can manage somehow. I will lend you the money, and you can pay me next half-year.'

'No, thank you; I had rather not.'

'But, Alice, you must; you sleep in our room, and we are all going to do it—Florence, and Harriet, and I.'

'I cannot see that sleeping in your room is any reason,' observed Alice, angrily.

'Then you will not hear the books, or look at them?' persisted Clara; 'and Justine says they are extremely pretty—quite beautiful, indeed.'

'Mrs Carter would not like it,' said Alice.

'If you once begin with those fancies, there is an end of it,' exclaimed Clara, impetuously. 'You will be as bad as Ruth, who is always saying that Mrs Carter, or her papa, or mamma, or some tiresome person or another, will not like it.'

Clara had, unknowingly, defeated her own purpose. She had touched upon a point on which her companion was at that instant particularly susceptible. The spirit of reverence was one of the most hopeful traits in Alice's disposition. Even when induced to join in ridicule, she was never free from self-reproach. Clara's expression, applied to Mr and Mrs Clifford, shocked her. She did not, however, withdraw at once, as Madeline would have done. Alice was always apt to waver, and she did not fully see how wrong the action proposed would be. She said she would think about it; she would not say yes; she thought they might do without her; and Clara, who

Digitized by Google

was soon tired of Alice when she had in any way what was called 'a good fit' upon her, presently left her. Then Alice was more happy. She had, in a manner, resisted temptation. Jessie ran away from Mrs Carter to play amongst the trees, and Alice took her place. The walk seemed to grow more pleasant from that moment. Mrs Carter had spent many of her young days at Richmond, and she had amusing stories to tell them of what she had done there. She knew also all the houses, and the names of several of the persons who lived in them, and she could point out the high mound where it is said that Henry the Eighth stood, looking over towards London, and watching till the rocket should be sent up into the air which was to give notice of the execution of Anne Boleyn. Alice began to feel that to be with persons older than herself, who were willing to notice and teach her, and whom she could thoroughly respect, was much better than having an idle conversation with idle companions of her own age.

The walk through the Park was ended, and there was just a quarter of an hour to spare before their return. Jessie wished to carry home a little remembrance of Richmond, and asked if she might go into a shop to buy something. She had a shilling with her, and she should like it very much. The idea once suggested, every one wished to do the same. Mrs Carter gave permission for 'a shilling—only a shilling—to be spent, and spent quickly; there was no time to lose;'—and the instant the consent was obtained the shop was entered, and the shopwomen were besieged with wants and questions. Madeline and Ruth agreed to put their shillings together, and buy a little silk box for their mamma—a morocco one, with rosewood winders, and the coloured silks all prepared. A smaller box, with cedar winders, Alice thought would just please Lady Catharine, and she was more anxious to buy something for her than for any of her schoolfellows. She put her hand into her pocket, but her purse was not there. She recollected having left it behind her, in her desk. She had taken it in her hand just before they came out, and then replaced it, thinking it would not be wanted.

'What shall I do? who will lend me some money? Please help me!' she exclaimed, in distress. Mrs Carter was not near, and every one else was busied with the purchases.

Madeline, however, heard, and, coming up to her, said, 'Do you want money, Alice? I can lend you some.'

Digitized by Google

'Yes, a shilling, if you would; but they are just going—look.'

Mrs Carter was hastening the putting up of the several parcels; she was afraid of being late for the steamer.

'The small silk case, if you please,' said Alice, anxiously, to the shopwoman. 'Pray let me have it directly.'

But, before the string was properly tied, Mrs Carter and the rest of the party had left the shop. Alice put down the money upon the counter, and was just going, when she was called back. 'The change, Miss; you have forgotten the change,' said the girl.'

Alice looked surprised. Madeline had given her half-a-crown by mistake. She took up the eighteen-pence, put it loose into the pocket of her dress, and hastened away. She meant to return the money to Madeline immediately, but her thoughts were occupied with the fear of not overtaking Mrs Carter; and when again seated on the deck of the steamer, Madeline was not near her, so that there was no convenient opportunity.

Ruth was with Mrs Carter, who appeared to take a particular pleasure in conversing with her. Ruth made herself very useful. She saw that every one took her own shawl, and was mindful of Mrs Carter's basket, and took care that Jessie should remain with her and be steady. She had a quiet way of ordering and arranging, to which all were inclined to give way. Even Clara Manners followed Ruth's suggestion, and then laughed and wondered how she could be foolish enough to attend to her. Ruth did not care for the laughter. She felt that her power in the school was increasing.

Alice watched it all, and wished she was like her. It was the old wish, but it was stronger on this day. Alice had experienced two states of mind, one arising from careless folly, from disrespect to her superiors, and idle companionship; the other occasioned by the conversation with Mary Vernon, the example of Ruth and Madeline, and the society of Mrs Carter. She had no doubt that to look up and honour is much happier, as well as much better for us all, than to indulge in ridicule.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXIV.

ALICE did not think of Madeline's money on the evening after their return from Richmond, and, strange to say, Madeline did not inquire about it. The next day Alice remembered, but at an awkward time, in school, when she was not allowed to talk; and then she recollected that she had not the same dress on which she had worn the day before, so that there would be no use in speaking to Madeline, for she could not give back the money till they went to bed. Alice was a procrastinator, and this kind of recollecting and delaying went on for some time.

Clara again named the books and the subscription, but Alice would give no answer. She hoped the idea would pass away, for she knew that Justine had carried home the volumes which had been read, and she had heard her say to Clara, 'Remember, they won't let you have any more, unless you pay directly.'

Alice was very fond of reading, and if the books which Justine promised to get were at all like that of which she had heard a part, she was sure they would be delightful, for they were in a style quite new to her, about grown-up persons, and Alice was just beginning to take a greater interest in the history of persons older than herself than in children's story-books.

But to counteract this temptation, there was the knowledge that Mrs Carter did not like any books to be read which she had not previously seen, and the certainty that the whole plan must be wrong, because Clara would not like it to be mentioned to Ruth.

Three days, however, after the Richmond party, as Alice was alone in the school-room just after tea, Clara and Florence Trevelyan looked in, and finding no one there besides Alice, Clara said: 'Alice, we have been wanting to speak to you all day.'

'I have been sitting opposite to you,' replied Alice; 'you have had plenty of opportunities for speaking.'

'Yes, but there are so many to listen,' said Florence; 'and Clara and I wish to talk to you by yourself. We want you to join us.'

'Join!' repeated Alice; 'Oh! I remember—but I have told you I can't, I have no money.'

Digitized by Google

'Never mind the money,' said Clara; 'we will manage that. But will you agree?'

'No; Mrs Carter would not like it.'

Clara shrugged her shoulders impatiently. I knew how it would be at Richmond. Whenever you get with Ruth and Madeline and the good set, Alice, you are not worth a farthing.'

'It will be ill-natured not to do it,' said Florence, in a more gentle tone; 'for it will oblige us to pay more than we meant.'

'And we cannot trust you,' added Clara; 'you may tell.'

Alice made no answer. With regard to trusting, it was very doubtful whether any one had a right to insist upon her keeping a secret of a wrong kind. 'I wish you would not hinder me,' she said. 'I must go and learn my lessons.'

'It is all Ruth's doing,' exclaimed Clara. 'She is always trying to get you over to her side. I hate people who are so over-good; and I can tell Miss Ruth, that if she has set her heart upon ever being judge, she had better take care; she shall never be judge with my consent.'

'But at any rate, if you will not join yourself, will you help me?' asked Florence. 'I want more money for Justine; will you lend it me?'

Alice hesitated. 'I have very little left,' she answered.

'O baby! baby! She wants her money for cakes,' said Clara, ironically.

Alice felt this taunt. Her fondness for sweet things was as strong now as in the days of the lost bonbon.

'It does not matter what I want it for,' she answered, coolly; 'but I have only half-a-crown left, and a shilling of that I owe Madeline.'

'But the eighteenpence, let me have that,' said Florence.

Alice held back, and observed that she did not think she had her purse down-stairs, though at the same time she foolishly showed her disposition to yield, by putting her hand into her pocket to feel for it. It was not there—she thought it might be in her desk—yes upon second thoughts, she remembered that it must be, and Alice opened the desk, still declaring that she did not mean to lend the money, because she did not think it right. Clara and Florence looked at each other and smiled. Alice found the purse, and stood with it in her hand, debating what she should do. 'I owe Madeline a shilling,' she said.

'Well,' replied Florence, 'pay that, and you will have eighteenpence left.'

Digitized by Google

The word eighteenpence seemed to strike Alice disagreeably. She cast her eyes upon her dress, then put her hand into her pocket, took it out, put it in again, and at length exclaimed—

'This was the dress, I am sure.'

'The dress? What do you mean?' inquired Clara and Florence.

'The dress I put the change into—the dress I wore at Richmond. What can have become of it?'

'Of the dress?' asked Clara, with a laugh. 'Why, you have it on.'

'The money—Madeline's money. She gave me half-a-crown—I had eighteenpence change. Where can it be?'

Alice searched again, and this time, as she drew out her hand, she looked extremely annoyed. There was a hole in her pocket; the money must have slipped through. Alice's spirit was not, however, easily depressed. When she was sure of the fact of her loss, she turned to Florence, and said—

'Then, Florence, you see it is impossible. I must give my money to Madeline now, to make up for the eighteenpence I have lost.'

'How provoking,' said Florence. 'Are you quite sure it is not there?'

'Quite; I have nothing in my pocket but a pencil and my handkerchief.'

Clara was going away.

'Stay one minute,' said Florence. 'Alice, just lend me the eighteenpence. I will repay it; and Madeline won't want it yet.'

'But I cannot: it is not mine now. Ask Madeline.'

'Ask Madeline! Impossible! She would find out something directly.'

'And remember, Alice,' said Clara, 'you are bound to help in some way. You have heard part of one of the books; it will be quite mean if you don't.'

Alice had a dread of meanness, perhaps from being conscious in her own heart that she was naturally not entirely free from it.

'But what shall I do,' she asked, 'if Madeline wants to be repaid?'

'Oh, make an excuse; pay the shilling, and then beg her to wait for the eighteenpence. There are a hundred ways of getting out of the difficulty. Borrow of some one else, if you are very much put to it.'

Digitized by Google

'But don't be frightened,' said Florence, feeling for Alice's evident perplexity. 'I shall be sure to have some money from home before the holidays.'

'Quite sure?'

'Yes, why should you doubt? Please give me the money.'

'We shall have some one asking after us if we stay here any longer,' said Clara. 'And, Alice you are bound to help, because you read the book.'

Poor Alice was in no danger of forgetting that fact. It was a weight upon her conscience already. She gave the money, and Florence and Clara, again reminding her not to mention what she had done, left her.

The holidays were now drawing near. After Mrs Carter's birthday, it was understood that all were to occupy themselves diligently in bringing the work of the half-year to a conclusion. The good conduct marks were reckoned frequently; and the elder girls were very industrious in finishing their drawings, and learning difficult pieces of music perfectly. Busy as the school always was, it was a great deal more busy when the holidays approached. This season was Anna Grant's particular delight. She was continually in a bustle. Nothing escaped her vigilance. She seemed to be everywhere at once, managing her own affairs cleverly, and suggesting what should be done with every other person's. Mary Vernon withdrew more and more from the exercise of her office of judge. It was Mrs Carter's idea. She thought that Mary might by this means be enabled to see how affairs were likely to be managed when she was away, and might be able to give Anna some useful hints. Besides, Mary was preparing for confirmation and her first Communion, and Mrs Carter did not wish her to be burdened with more business than was absolutely necessary.

It was curious to watch Ruth's manner at this time. She appeared to follow wherever Anna Grant led, for the purpose of smoothing whatever Anna had ruffled. She never put herself forward. She gave her opinion rather less decidedly than before; her position was that of a peace-maker, and it was one which gained her many friends. Ruth was not hypocritical in this. She did really like to do kind things, and she disapproved of Anna's domineering manner; but, besides, she had a view to her own interests—a wish to obtain praise. As to being chosen judge, Ruth was fully aware that such a thing was not likely to be yet. She only looked to it by and by.

Digitized by Google

Madeline did not think much about the money she had lent Alice. It was a common thing for money to be borrowed, and every now and then there were grand settlement days; but Madeline was very careless in money matters—carelessness, indeed, was her fault in everything. She had an account book, but it was never regularly kept, and Ruth often scolded her for it. Once or twice she said, 'Alice, you owe me some money,' and Alice would answer, 'Yes;' and there the subject ended, much to the relief of Alice; for Florence Trevelyan still delayed the repayment of her debt. She was always expecting money from home, but unfortunately the money never came.

What arrangements had been made with Justine about the books, Alice did not exactly know. Nothing was told her, but she saw whispering and meaning looks pass between Clara and Justine; and at night there was generally some mysterious volume read silently by one of the party in her bedroom, the title of which she was not allowed to see. She had reason to believe that Justine had paid a subscription to a library, and engaged to bring the books as they were wanted.

Alice was not at all happy in thinking this—her conscience was often seriously disturbed as to whether she ought not to mention the subject to Mrs Carter; but she could not endure to repeat tales. She had read part of one book, she had lent money to procure others—it seemed mean to take part in a pleasure, and then to betray her companion. What could she do? That first fault, the idling away of a half hour on a Sunday afternoon, reading a wrong book, how much uneasiness it was causing her!

'The letters are very late,' said Harriet Trevelyan, one morning, as they were all preparing their lesson books before school began. 'Florence and I want to hear whether we may have our new bonnets.'

'And I want to know whether papa will come and fetch me home,' said Janet.

'And I want to hear about my little new dog,' cried Jessie O'Neile, determined not to be outdone in wishes. 'And what do you want to hear about, Ruth?'

'Oh! a great many things,' replied Ruth, 'more than I can remember just now; I am too busy.'

'And you? and you?' continued Jessie, and she ran from one to the other, making every one answer something to her

Digitized by Google

questions. At last she went up to Anna Grant. Unlike her usual custom, Anna was sitting quite silent. 'What do you want, Anna?' said Jessie.

'Nothing, dear, nothing; run away, will you.'

'Oh! but you must say something.'

'No, Jessie; don't be troublesome.' Anna's voice was not so much hasty as grave.

Ruth called Jessie away, and asked Madeline if she knew what was the matter with Anna.

'The matter! No; is there anything the matter?'

Florence Trevelyan was standing near, and hearing the question, she said, 'I can tell you; Anna is anxious.'

'Oh! yes, I remember,' said Ruth. 'She heard of her papa being ill yesterday; but I did not think it was anything serious.'

'Mrs Carter was talking to her this morning; I don't know what about,' observed Florence. 'I suppose it was about that, but I never asked. How I wish the letters would come! I do long to know whether we may have the bonnets.'

The postman's knock was heard. Harriet and Florence rushed to the door. Anna rose quickly, and then sat down again. 'Poor Anna!' said Ruth, compassionately, 'I am afraid it must be something of consequence. I suppose if anything were to happen to her papa, she would leave school.'

'Yes,' replied Madeline, 'and how sorry she would be! I mean, besides its being dreadful for her papa to die. I wish we could help her.'

'We cannot,' answered Ruth. 'Dawson will be here in a moment to tell us whom the letters are for.'

'I wish I might go and ask for her at once,' said Madeline.

'No, no, Maddy; indeed you must not; it is against the rules. She will be sure, I should think, to leave school, if anything happens to her papa. I remember some one saying so one day.'

'So do I. When she is gone, what a little set we shall be!'

'Harriet and Florence are great ones,' said Ruth.

'Yes; but they never seem anything; they are so silly. Ruth, you will be quite like the eldest.'

'Oh no!' exclaimed Ruth, 'there will be—let me see—three at least older than I am.'

'But they are not so high in the school. Ruth, you would be judge.'

Digitized by Google

Ruth made no reply.

'Is it very unkind to think of such things, I wonder?' said Madeline. 'I am very sorry for Anna.'

'So am I. I wonder Dawson does not come.'

Anna's patience was exhausted. She went to the door and stood there; and when Dawson appeared and gave the names of those who had letters, Anna was the first to go. Madeline still remained by Ruth, thinking and wondering; but Ruth took little notice of her. She bent over her copy-book, and began to write an exercise; yet every now and then, when the door opened, she raised her eyes and looked round quickly.

Several who had left the room returned. Anna Grant was not amongst the number. Mrs Carter, it was said, had given her a letter, and sent her to her own chamber to read it. Further inquiries were put a stop to by the commencement of school. Ruth's thoughts on that morning were not betrayed by words; but they must have been engrossing, for she said her lessons imperfectly, and was twice reproved for not answering when spoken to. Madeline was reproved also; but it was for whispering to her nearest neighbour in the reading class, that she was afraid something very bad must be the matter about Anna, because she had not been in school since the letter came. During the whole of school-time there was a quiet bustle in the house. Mary Vernon came in and out, and searched in Anna's desk, and carried off all that she could find belonging to her; but no one ventured to ask questions, under the fear of a forfeit. When the lessons were over, all gave way to the expression of their curiosity. Janet had heard a strange gentleman's voice; Fanny Wilson fancied that Dawson had been told to order a carriage; every one had something to say, except Ruth; she sat silent. Luncheon was brought in; luncheon, instead of dinner. There was no reason given for the change; but they were ordered to keep in the school-room, and the pianos were stopped. Presently a further piece of information was obtained from Dawson. A strange gentleman was in the drawing-room, and Miss Grant was packing up her things, and crying very much.

'Ruth,' said Madeline, when she heard this, 'I am sure it must be true what we thought. Anna's papa must be very ill, and she must be going away.'

'Yes, probably.' This was all that Ruth would say, and Madeline went to tell her thoughts to others.

For some time all talked of Anna, and really felt for her;

Digitized by Google

Alice amongst the number. But Alice had not a mind entirely free for any other person's anxieties: she was fretted for herself. Florence Trevelyan had, as she expected, received a letter from home, but Alice could not discover what was said in it about money. She inquired, and was told that Mrs Trevelyan only wrote an order as to the trimming of the new bonnets. The reply was given hastily, as if the question was one of no consequence whatever; and Florence went on talking about Anna, and the probability of her leaving school, without giving one thought to Alice's look of annoyance.

'Alice, I want you. Come here, will you,' cried Clara Manners, as Alice left the luncheon table, grave and downcast.

'Just tell me whether you really asked for the money, Florence?' repeated Alice; but Florence was busying herself with helping bread and butter, and appeared not to have heard the question.

'How can you be so silly and unkind, Alice?' said Clara, when Alice went to her. 'You choose such very awkward moments. Florence can't answer you about the money when there are so many near. If you want to know, I can tell you. Her mamma will not send her any; she has been extravagant.'

'But Clara'—and Alice reddened with anger—'she must have some money; she must pay me. I owe it to Madeline.'

'Well! well! don't fuss about it. It will be managed some way. All I beg is, that you will keep quiet.'

'But has Florence used my money? has she given it to Justine yet?'

'Those who ask, won't hear; and those who don't ask, don't care to know,' replied Clara, ironically.

'But indeed it is so unjust, so unfair. I never heard anything like it,' remonstrated Alice. 'I will ask Ruth; I will tell'——

'Hush! hush! gently—be quiet!' continued Clara, laughing. 'I only meant to tease you. You shall have your money by and by; but you must be contented to wait. No one means to cheat you of your eighteenpence.'

Cheat!' exclaimed Alice, in a loud voice; 'I should think not.'

'No, of course, no one means to cheat you,' continued Clara, in the same indifferent manner. 'You shall have it some day or other.'

The tone provoked Alice beyond endurance.

Digitized by Google

'I will not wait for some day or other. I will have it now,' she said. 'If it is not given me, I will tell Mrs Carter all about it.'

'And tell Mrs Carter that you read a story-book in the dressing-room on a Sunday afternoon,' replied Clara, still answering with perfect coolness. 'Where will be your chance of the good-conduct prize then, Alice? You want how many tickets to make up the number?'

'Eight,' said Alice.

'And you are nearly sure of them now. Tell, and you will forfeit four. Good-bye.'

Clara laughed, left her seat, and went to the other end of the room. Alice stood with the luncheon in her hand upon the verge of a burst of passion. All her companions were talking and amusing themselves, except Ruth. Alice's impulse was to go at once and open her heart to her. She advanced a step and then paused. Ruth was not quite the person to whom she would have chosen to confess a fault. Ruth noticed her approach, and asked if she would fetch some luncheon for her, as she was very busy. Alice did as she was requested, and putting the plate of bread and butter and the glass of water upon the top of the desk, remained by Ruth quite silent. Clara saw her. Under pretence of wishing for some more luncheon, she came up and took away the plate, and, as she passed Alice, said in a very low tone—

'Mind, Alice! if you tell, you have no chance of the prize.'

'Thank you; that is my own concern,' said Alice, haughtily, aloud.

'What is the matter, Alice?' asked Ruth, as she looked up with a smile. 'What are you and Clara at war about?'

'Nothing. We are not at war; only she irritates me so that I can't bear it.'

'Does she? Never mind; she teases every one.'

'She does more than tease me,' exclaimed Alice; 'she makes me so angry I can scarcely bear myself, or her either; and I won't bear it; I won't submit any longer. I will tell Mrs Carter, and Miss Barnard, and Lady Catharine; I will tell every one, that I will.'

'But what will you tell them? What has she done?'

The temptation to speak out was strong; but Alice thought of the good-conduct prize, and was afraid of betraying herself.

'Oh! everything; she is provoking in everything.'

Digitized by Google

Ruth laid down her pen, and said, while she looked steadily in Alice's face—

'Alice, if you dislike Clara so much, why are you always with her?'

'I am not with her; I try to keep away from her—I hate her.'

Ruth looked shocked.

'Yes,' continued Alice, quickly, 'I do hate her; and I am right. She does a great many more wrong things than Mrs Carter or any one guesses; and I know it will be found out, and we shall all get punished together. I would give all the world to be away from her.'

'But,' said Ruth, in surprise, 'if there is anything wrong, surely, Alice, you ought to tell Mrs Carter.'

'No, I ought not; that is, I can't. Ruth, you must not ask me about it.'

'You had better tell—indeed, you had better, Alice,' said Ruth.

'I cannot, at least, not to-day. Don't speak so loudly, Ruth.'

Ruth seemed perplexed and pained. 'No one can guess what you mean, Alice,' she said; 'but you will do very wrong if you do not tell. If I were in your place, I should directly.'

'Hush! hush! Ruth, pray take care. I would not have Clara hear for the world. Some day or other perhaps I may.'

Alice grew frightened at what she had said, and was wishing if possible to make some excuse and change the conversation, when the current of her ideas was altered by the entrance of Miss Barnard. Her manner was not stiff as usual; she seemed much distressed and hurried, and it was with some hesitation that, after ordering silence, she informed all who were present that one of their companions had met with a severe affliction. Anna Grant's father was dying. Her brother was come for her, and she was to return home immediately. 'As there is no probability of her return,' continued Miss Barnard, 'she wishes to see you all for the last time. She will be here directly. The carriage is ready to take her away.'

'Poor Anna! how very sorry I am!' exclaimed Madeline.

Ruth turned pale; there seemed a struggle in her mind. After a moment's pause, she said, 'Yes, I am very sorry.'

'So sudden as it is,' continued Madeline, 'it must be very dreadful for her.'

Digitized by Google

Instead of conversing, Ruth fixed her eye upon the door.

'Hark! she is coming,' said Madeline.

Ruth rose, and went forward a few steps.

An unsteady hand was laid upon the lock, then the handle was turned firmly, and Anna and Mary Vernon came in together. Anna was trembling violently; she did not utter a single word.

Ruth was the first to kiss her, to say 'Good-bye;' and only good-bye. Something else seemed upon her lips, but it was not spoken.

Madeline threw her arms round her neck, and whispered: 'Perhaps he will get well; you will be sure and come back again.'

Ruth heard the whisper, and as if her conscience reproached her for an omission, she went back again and added: 'Dear Anna, it may not be as bad as you expect.' Anna's tears only fell the faster for this attempt at comfort, and hurrying over the partings, she broke away from her companions, and hastened to the carriage.

She was gone. There was the vacant place, the unoccupied desk, the blank of absence. She had been their playfellow, the sharer of their studies, their interests, their hopes and fears. She had been as their sister; nurtured under one roof, guarded by one eye. She was separated from them, perhaps, on earth for ever. Those who had thought and spoken the most hardly of Anna Grant were kind and pitying now.

It was towards the evening. The whole party had just returned from a walk. Ruth and Madeline were together in the dressing-room. Madeline was speaking of Anna; her trials, her character, the difference her departure would make in the school; and Ruth was listening to all her sister said, but making few observations of her own. Her quiet abstracted manner was very marked.

'Ruth,' said Madeline at length, 'do you care to talk to me? You seem as if you were thinking of something else.'

'Yes, indeed, Maddy; how can you fancy I do not? What was it you heard Clara and Florence say?'

'Nothing more than I told you. They both thought you as clever as Anna, and a great deal more agreeable. And you are so, Ruth; every one thinks it. How pleased papa and mamma will be when you are judge!'

'Madeline,' said Ruth, gravely, 'you should not reckon upon any such thing as certain.'

Digitized by Google

'I do not reckon upon it as certain; I only say what others say.'

'Well! it is better not to talk about it,' said Ruth. She sat down upon a trunk, and began to fold up her walking dress. Madeline looked as if she did not quite understand her, and after remaining a few moments longer, left her.

Then Ruth did not talk, but she thought. She indulged a dream of ambition. She made herself the first; and for the time she was quite happy. The object of her wishes appeared very near. There was no one—she felt there was no one—to compete with her. To attain such a position while yet so young made it only the more valuable. And Ruth did not think only of her parent's gratification. She placed herself in imagination before strangers; she heard herself praised as Mary Vernon was praised; admired, respected, by Mrs Carter and her friends, as well as by her schoolfellows. Many things which she imagined were impossible; some, if they had been stated plainly in words, might have appeared ridiculous; but Ruth was thinking by herself, and had no one to warn her. Only the eye of God was upon her, and His Word had taught her that it is a dangerous, a sinful state of mind, 'to love the praise of men more than the praise of God.'

How long Ruth might have remained occupied with her own thoughts is uncertain. She was disturbed by the sound of an angry voice—Jessie O'Neile's; another was heard at intervals, provokingly cool—it was Clara's.

'Now, little one, be quiet; dry your eyes and be good.'

Then came a fresh burst of sobbing, and again, but with greater irritation of tone, the half command, half entreaty, 'not to be so naughty.'

Ruth ran into the school-room to see what was amiss.

'Clara won't let me look for what I have lost, she won't let me see; she has my pencil; I lent it to her,' exclaimed Jessie, instantly appealing to Ruth as her unfailing champion.

'I never allow any one to look in my desk but myself,' said Clara, keeping her hand firmly on the lid. 'Little children have no business to search in desks which don't belong to them.'

'But she has my pencil; it is in there, and I want it; I will have it,' continued Jessie.

'Hush! hush! Jessie!' interposed Ruth; 'this is very naughty; let me speak to Clara, and you sit down. If you have the pencil, Clara, do give it up.'

Digitized by Google

'But I have not. I don't know anything about it. I don't even know what it is like.'

'But I do,' said Ruth; 'will you let me look instead?'

'No, I thank you; I will trouble you not to interfere, Ruth;' and Clara still kept her hold upon the desk.

Jessie, who had remained by Ruth, burst forth into another fit of passion which it was in vain to attempt to pacify; and angry with the little girl's temper, whilst vexed at the provocation she had received, Ruth was hesitating how to act, when Mrs Carter came into the room unexpectedly. Ruth was thinking of Jessie, not of Clara. She did not see the change in Clara's manner; the haste with which she opened her own desk, pulled out a book, and thrust it into Florence Trevelyan's; she only heard the next moment the permission to come and search, if she liked it; though it was certain that Jessie's pencil was not there. This was true; but the information came too late to be any comfort or help to Jessie, who being discovered in a fit of passion, was receiving a very severe reproof in consequence. Ruth really felt for the child as she stood trembling by Mrs Carter's side.

Ruth herself had never since she first came to school received such a reprimand upon any subject. Yet Mrs Carter was very gentle in all she said. She spoke indeed strongly of the sin, the danger of such a temper; but it was with a quiet earnestness which insensibly stilled the child's excited feelings. Jessie was sent to her room; and Mrs Carter, calling Ruth aside, inquired into the history of the quarrel.

'You are Jessie's true friend, Ruth,' she said, 'and I trust to you more than to any one to help her in overcoming this terrible temper.'

Ruth smiled; and allowed that Jessie was sadly passionate. In this instance she did not exactly know what had made her angry, but she believed it was a trifle. Jessie wished to search in Clara's desk, and Clara did not like it.

'Then there is no fault, I hope, to be found with Clara,' said Mrs Carter. 'That is a relief to my mind. I cannot endure the idea of tyranny.'

Ruth was not certain that there had not been some tyranny exercised, at least in manner, but she could bring neither charge nor proof. And Mrs Carter went on speaking about Jessie.

'After having been at school more than a year, there ought,' she said, 'to be an improvement.'

Digitized by Google

'Jessie is better at times,' said Ruth, in a timid voice.

'Yes, at times; not as often as I wish, and have expected.'

'It must be very difficult to conquer such a violent temper,' said Ruth; and then, after a slight hesitation, she added, 'Mamma says she does not know what she should do if Madeline and I had violent tempers.'

Something in the tone of this speech appeared to strike Mrs Carter disagreeably. Her eye rested steadily upon Ruth, as she said—

'Ruth, my dear, we must remember one thing. We are apt to speak of passion as if it were the only kind of bad temper, except, perhaps, sulkiness; and we think that some persons have no evil temper. I do not believe this is so.'

'But passionate persons must be worse than others,' observed Ruth, whilst a slight blush tinged her cheek.

'They are worse in the sight of their fellow-creatures,' replied Mrs Carter; 'but there may be others quite as bad in the eye of God. The truth is, I believe that all persons have some evil temper. Very quiet and generally amiable people, as well as others. Perhaps there is some one point on which they will not bear opposition; or when they are injured, they retain the remembrance a long time; or they are positive and determined, though in a gentle way. Now, God sees the temptation of each individual; and the person who indulges that secret sin is as guilty in His sight as one who offends openly. Does this seem hard to you?'

Ruth could scarcely bring herself to allow that it did. She was afraid of expressing her opinion.

'I think the Bible teaches us something of this kind,' continued Mrs Carter. 'You know very well that it warns us against angry words, as being the beginning of the sin of murder; but we are not told that angry words were the cause of the first murder. Rather, we have reason to believe that it was a secret evil temper—envy—because the offering of Abel was accepted before that of Cain. I speak to you in this way, my dear Ruth,' continued Mrs Carter, 'because you are by nature so docile and mild, that such a temper is more likely to be your snare than passion, or fretfulness, or sulkiness. I do not mean to say that I have ever seen any traces of it; quite the contrary, but it may be in your heart though you do not perceive it.'

Ruth bent her eyes upon the ground, and looked very uncomfortable.

Digitized by Google

Mrs Carter watched the expression of her face, and presently added—

'Passionate persons cannot help knowing their fault; and though it requires a great struggle, great self-command, to overcome it; yet if they have high religious principles, they are nearly certain of success. Quiet, mild persons may go on for years without knowing their danger till the trial comes, and they fall under it. Self-command is necessary for the one temper; self-examination for the other.'

Ruth's countenance was so downcast when Mrs Carter said this, that it was evident she took it as a reproof.

It seemed wrong that she should be left with this idea, when she had done nothing to merit censure; and, as Mrs Carter was going away, she said—

'Remember, Ruth, my dear, I do not in the least mean to imply that the temper I have spoken of is yours. I have no reason to distrust you in any way; and now that poor Anna is gone, you will be more my right hand than ever.' Ruth remembered the last words; she forgot the former ones.

Ruth followed Mrs Carter to the parlour. It was tea-time, and when the tea was over the party dispersed into little groups about the room; some talking, some trying to work by the fading light; one or two, who could not make up their minds to bear the loneliness of the school-room in the evening, gathering round the window, trying to learn their lessons for the next day; while Janet Harding practised her last new piece, strumming the notes with a heavy hand in bold defiance of time and taste. Ruth sat thinking for some little time by herself. She held a book in her hand, but it was merely an excuse for occupation. Presently she laid it down, and going up to Alice, who was talking to Harriet Trevelyan, she said—

'Alice, I wish very much to speak to you; can you come to me for a minute?'

Alice started at being thus suddenly addressed, and appeared unwilling to comply.

'She was engaged,' she said; 'Harriet was amusing her with a droll story; would not by and by do just as well?'

'No, not just as well. Really, I wish it, if you can come. Please do, Alice,' added Ruth, in her most persuasive manner.

Alice begged Harriet to wait till she returned, and went aside with Ruth.

'It is something particular that I wish to say. Alice,' began

Digitized by Google

Ruth; 'very particular, indeed; about what you mentioned this morning. I have been thinking a great deal of it. If there is anything wrong going on, indeed you ought to stop it; or if you cannot do that, you should name it.'

'But Ruth,' said Alice, taken quite by surprise by this unexpected appeal; 'you have such a memory. What did I say? I forget. How came you to think of it again?'

'I could not help thinking of it,' answered Ruth. 'It has been upon my mind all day. It has something to do with Clara, I am nearly sure. O Alice! if you would only break off from her entirely!'

Alice heaved a deep sigh.

'She will bring you into dreadful mischief by and by,' continued Ruth; 'and she is so very bold and careless; and Lady Catharine would be so vexed if she were to know it. But I don't think, Alice, you ever think of Lady Catharine; you do just what Clara tells you.'

'Ruth, you do not know,' exclaimed Alice. 'You are quite wrong. I do think of Lady Catharine very much indeed; and I do not do what Clara tells me. I have not done so now. I cannot imagine why you should make this sudden fuss. It must be because they all say you are to be judge now that Anna is gone.'

'It has nothing to do with being judge,' answered Ruth, with some constraint in her tone; 'but you are acting wrongly, and I know I ought to tell you of it.'

'I do not wish to be told, thank you,' replied Alice, proudly. 'I can manage my own concerns. Perhaps you will be kind enough to wait till you are judge before you interfere.'

'Alice, I have no wish to interfere; whether I am judge or not; but one thing is certain, that unless you leave off being with Clara and her set, you will never please Mrs Carter.'

'Or you,' added Alice; 'you had better put yourself in.'

Ruth would make no answer to this retort; but again she urged her request, and with such eagerness that she did not perceive the piano had stopped, until she was heard in a loud tone to say—

'Alice, you know that to allow wrong things to go on without stopping them, is almost as bad as doing them yourself.'

Before Alice could reply, Clara Manners came up to her. Her manner was evidently forced as she said, whilst trying to laugh—

Digitized by Google

'What is that you are preaching about, Ruth? You have no idea of converting Alice, have you?'

'I have an idea of making her do what is right,' replied Ruth; 'and that she can never do whilst she conceals things. And, Clara, if I thought it would be any use, I would speak to you also.'

'Speak, if you please,' answered Clara; 'I am quite willing to listen.'

'You will listen, I daresay,' continued Ruth; 'but you will turn away and make a joke of it the next minute.'

'Perhaps I may,' replied Clara; 'yet I should be glad to hear what you have to say.'

The tone in which this was uttered betrayed a little anxiety; and, as Ruth did not immediately answer, Clara again begged that she should be told at once what it was to which Ruth referred when she alluded to concealment.

'You must ask Alice,' answered Ruth; 'she knows. She says "that something wrong is going on."'

'I did not say that, Clara,' interrupted Alice, eagerly. Ruth's eyes sparkled with intelligence; and laying her hand upon Alice's shoulder, she said—

'Then Clara has something to do with it. I was sure it was so. Alice, why will you be led by her?'

'Because she has too much spirit to be put into leading-strings by you,' exclaimed Clara. 'Alice is not a baby, like Jessie O'Neile; she will not be ordered and scolded by a child. Alice, come with me, and we will leave Ruth to herself.' She put her arm around Alice to draw her away, but Alice stood still.

'Clara,' said Ruth, 'you are tempting Alice to do wrong. Remember, if I suspect that you are carrying on what Mrs Carter disapproves, I must and will discover and mention it.

'Hush! pray be quiet. Miss Barnard is coming,' said Alice. Clara paused as she was moving away. She placed herself opposite to Ruth. Her countenance expressed intense indignation, and, in a low whisper, she said—

'And you, Ruth, remember, since you choose to interfere with my concerns, I have a full right to interfere with yours. Half the school are my friends, and I will take care you shall never be judge.'

'Ring the bell for candles,' cried Miss Barnard, in a cheerful voice. 'Girls, get your work. Where is the book we are

Digitized by Google

reading? Hush! such a noise! Fanny, your voice is louder than all.'

It was a cheerful scene that evening in Mrs Carter's parlour; young, happy, innocent faces were there; innocent reading; innocent occupations. Alas! that in this world of sin evil should lurk under the fairest forms.

Nearly at the head of the table sat Ruth; she was more silent than the rest—more grave. Now and then a cloud gathered upon her countenance; her brow was knit with thought. What could be passing in her mind? The trial of Ruth's temper was come, but she did not know it.

When she meditated the best means of discovering Clara's secret, she thought that her wish was to please Mrs Carter. There was a feeling much deeper—revenge. Clara had said that Ruth should never be judge—and Ruth from that moment was her enemy.

CHAPTER XXV.

MANY engrossing thoughts occupied Ruth's mind when she laid her head upon her pillow, and in the quietness of night reviewed all that had passed in the day.

She seemed to have made a sudden start, to have grown older. Anna's departure had made an astonishing difference to her, much greater than she could have foreseen. It had raised her position in the school; it had placed her almost where she most wished to be. In the opinion of her companions she saw that she was no longer a child. And Anna's departure had made a further difference to Ruth: it had brought out the strong feelings which lurked under her calm manner—the eagerness, determination, pride, which had till now been guessed at only. As Ruth meditated upon Clara's threat, she became very angry at the idea of being thwarted in her favourite wish. The threat itself might be an idle one, probably it was: Clara did not stand high enough in the school to have much real influence, however she might boast; but the threat had been made, and that in Ruth's eyes was sufficient. Something must be thought of at once to expose Clara's conduct, and prevent her from doing mischief. And what should this be? How would it be best to

Digitized by Google

act? Would it be advisable to go at once to Mrs Carter? But she had no actual charge to bring forward, and the system of complaining and suspecting was one which Mrs Carter entirely discouraged. Was it probable that Alice would be induced to confess more? Alice was fickle as the winds. It entirely depended upon her mood the next morning whether she would be Clara's friend or the contrary. Could general inquiries be made? But if Ruth was suspected of interfering and prying into secrets, she was not likely to be chosen judge. The way was not at all clear, and at length Ruth fell into a reverie about Clara and Anna, and her home, and Lady Catharine, and her Italian master, which by degrees became perfect unconsciousness, and she was asleep.

Our last thoughts at night are not without their consequences. As we lie down, so do we wake up again. When we have closed our eyes after humble, earnest prayer; when the faint recollections and ideas which precede sleep have been blended with feelings of gratitude to our Almighty Father; when we have commended our spirits to His care, and prayed that if we die before we wake, we may be safe in His keeping; then as we re-open our eyes to the light of a new morning, so do we re-open them also to the consciousness of the presence, and the protection, and the favour of God. It seems, indeed, as if the last thoughts before sleep were impressed upon us with peculiar power. Perhaps there are few who in childhood have set themselves diligently to some difficult lesson, who have not accustomed themselves to repeat their tasks the very last thing, as it is called. They have been told that it will help them, and it most frequently does. That which was imperfectly remembered at night becomes, we know not how, perfect in the morning. Learning is our duty, and the habits which assist us in this duty are good. But we all, young and old, rich and poor, high born and lowly, have a much harder task, a much more difficult duty.

God calls upon us to conquer our evil tempers; to learn to love Him; to prepare ourselves for Eternity. Is it a strange thing to ask, that we should take the same pains to please Him, that we do to please a fellow-creature? that we should be as anxious for the glorious crown of heaven, as for the little prize which may be the reward of our endeavours here? If it is not, let us remember that the thoughts with which we sink to sleep are the thoughts with which we shall probably awake, and let

Digitized by Google

them be thoughts of God. The short prayer, the psalm, the simple verse of a hymn, which are the last words on our lips, and contain the last idea allowed to rest upon our minds, will remain with us fixed, stamped, as it were, upon our memories, to check us in the hour of temptation, and aid us on our path to heaven.

Madeline Clifford went to sleep, almost whilst repeating the words of the hymn which had been her nightly prayer since the first day when she could put together a few connected words. And the hymn had not been a form; it had been said seriously, with a feeling of trust, of childlike faith. When the morning bell disturbed her dreams, she rose with a sense of energy and duty to prepare for the business of the day. Ruth rose to prepare for business also. She was never late; this day she was particularly early; dressed before any one else. This was noticed, but no one knew the reason why it should be so. Ruth's prayers had been hurried over, but that was a secret between herself and the Great God before whom she knelt.

'We shall hear from home to-day, I suppose, Ruth,' said Madeline to her sister, as the post time drew near. 'Papa will fix the day for coming for us. Let me see—Thursday week—that will be—how many days?'

'Ten,' replied Ruth, with rather an absent air.

'Ten? yes, ten exactly. How I do long for it! Just fancy, Ruth, the railroad, and the Cottington coach, and dear mamma waiting for us at the bottom of the village. Don't you think she will come to meet us? she said she would.'

'Yes, I daresay,' was Ruth's reply with the same manner, as if she was thinking of something else. Ruth was looking at Clara and Florence Trevelyan. They were standing together talking. Florence held a book in her hand; a dirty volume with a red mark at the back. Ruth drew nearer, and began to search for a music book on the piano. Clara's back was towards her, and she was not seen. She heard Clara say, 'She will be here to-day, or to-morrow, and then she will bring the third volume. If you have not finished this, you must to-night.'

Florence nodded assent, and, concealing the book under a parcel which she held in her hand, asked if anything was wanted from the bedrooms, as Mrs Carter had given her permission to go up-stairs to put away her work—one or two things were named, and then Florence went away; and almost immediately afterwards, the well-known knock announced the arrival of the

Digitized by Google

postman. Perhaps there was scarcely one amongst the many who were assembled that had not some misgiving about letters on that morning; a little fear as to the news which might be received. We never understand fully what is meant by the 'change and chances of this mortal life,' until we have either received ourselves, or seen others receive, some unexpected startling intelligence. The first time in our lives that this happens seems to make known to us a new truth, something which we had heard before, without at all comprehending it. Nothing was now said about hopes, and fears, and wishes for letters; all were silent; and the few who were summoned to the study, went out and returned again, almost without an observation being made. Ruth was amongst the number. Madeline waited for her impatiently.

'A letter from mamma! how delightful! Ruth, give it me, do. Let me look at the direction.'

'It is a very long letter,' said Ruth. She did not appear as eager to open her letter as usual, and Madeline caught it from her.

'Ruth, dear, you are so slow. Let me see; perhaps there is something for Alice in it.'

The letter was addressed to 'Miss Clifford,' only; and Ruth began to read, Madeline seated on the corner of her chair, peeping over her shoulder, to be quite sure that it was not meant for her.

'My very dear children,' were the first words: then the letter was for them both, and Madeline had a full right to go on reading. The first part certainly was written for both. It told them all the Laneton news; about their grandmamma, the school, and the cottages, old Roger's grand-children, Benson's sister, the new woman at the Manor Lodge—the alteration in the flower beds. Then followed a part which seemed particularly intended for Ruth, as it was in answer to a letter of hers received a few days previously.

'I am looking forward most anxiously to next week, counting the days till I can see my darlings again. I fancy you both standing before me, grown and improved in appearance, and, I may also hope, in really important points. But, my dearest Ruth, your last note has given me some anxious thoughts; very far, I am sure, from your wish. You tell me that when Mary Vernon is gone, there will be an idle set left, and that one or two will be very bad examples to the rest. I am afraid this may be true, not only because you say it, but because I

Digitized by Google

know how great a difference the absence or presence of one person will make in a school. But, my dear child, I should be glad to know more particularly what you mean by an idle set. I long to hear more details from yourself. Sometimes I am frightened for you, and think that you and Madeline may be tempted to join it. It would grieve me very much to find you return home altered, grown careless, or to see that you had not simple, delicate, lady-like minds. Idleness and thoughtlessness in young girls generally lead to idle conversation. I trust you are on your guard. You know how I have warned you before, entreated you to be particular in your conversation. I do not know anything about which I have more fears than this, for it is one of the greatest dangers of your present life. I have full confidence in you that you will be true and sincere in all you say, and that you will try to be gentle-tempered and diligent; and I have a humble trust that, through the mercy of God, you will be led day by day to understand more of your duty to Him; but I have a fear sometimes that, without meaning to do wrong, without being aware at first that you are doing wrong, you may be led into a species of talking, which may be a mischief to you for your whole life. Few persons, whether children or grown-up persons, understand how important words are. If we do not give way to anger, and if we are watchful to speak the truth, and to guard against irreverence, we are apt to imagine that we are quite safe. But in the Bible we read also of "foolish talking and jesting," which, it is said, are not "convenient;" that is, not suitable and proper. Now it is not easy to explain exactly what is foolish talking; and I trust and believe that as yet you have heard very little of it, and have never joined in it; but I will tell you how you may know at once if others, or if you yourselves (for of course what I say is for Madeline also), are giving way to it.

'Whenever you speak to your companions upon subjects which you would not name to me or to Mrs Carter; when things are said which shock you, such as you never have heard at home; or if you are tempted to ask questions which you would not like to ask me, or any person older than yourself, then you may be certain that your talking is foolish and wrong; even more—sinful. As a plain rule, when you doubt whether what you are doing, or saying, is right, stop instantly. It is possible, my dear children, that this rule may prove a difficult one in conversation. Your companions may laugh at you, and almost force you to listen to

Digitized by Google

them; but if you will only persevere in turning away, and openly declaring that you disapprove of such conversation, and will have nothing to do with it, you may be certain of gaining your point at last. If they speak evil amongst themselves, they will not thrust it upon you, for there is nothing which commands more respect than a pure, simple mind. How great a blessing such a mind is, you can little know! It is beyond all price. If you once lose it by talking upon wrong subjects to idle companions, it will be gone for ever. You may try for your whole lives, earnestly, unceasingly, but you will never regain it fully; and in after years, when you would give up all your hopes of earthly happiness for a holy, devoted, pure heart, you will find yourselves distressed and haunted, as it were, by the silly, improper words and ideas, which you learned without stopping to consider whether they were right or wrong.

'Another subject of the same kind, which I am anxious to mention to you again, though I have often named it before, is your reading. I know that Mrs Carter is extremely particular, quite as much so as I should be; but she cannot be always with you, and it is possible that books which it is not desirable you should read may fall in your way. There will be less difficulty here in avoiding temptation. You have a plain law given you, and you must keep it. The books which Mrs Carter has not seen you are of course bound not to read. It is with reading as it is with conversation. Once read a wrong, bad book, and the mischief it will do you can never be repaired. God has given us the choice of learning both good and evil, but He has not given us the choice of forgetting. I am writing you a long letter, my dearest children, but it is upon a subject which interests me extremely; I did not mean to give you a dull lecture, but I love you so very, very dearly; I so long for you to be pure-minded, and simple, and holy, it would grieve me so bitterly to find that you had learned wrong things at school—that is the reason why I am urgent. Evil conversation is the great fault of a school. No one can keep you from it but yourselves. No one, even, can exactly tell you what is evil and what is not. But God has given you a natural instinct which, if you obey, you will be safe. Once more I would say to you, whatever you would be ashamed of talking about to me, or Mrs Carter, or any person older than yourselves, that you may be quite certain is not a fit topic of conversation with your companions. Will you remember this; or rather, pray to God to

Digitized by Google

teach you to remember it, and give you strength to act upon it? I shall write again to fix, if possible, the particulars of your journey, and fix the appointed time, though it is probable that you may be called home before, as your papa is expecting to be summoned to town on business; and if so he must request Mrs Carter to allow you to return with him. I shall write by this same post to prepare her for seeing him, but it is very uncertain when he may go, therefore I cannot promise you any more exact notice. I might have kept all I had to say till we met, but your letter, my dear Ruth, gave me some uneasy thoughts, and I could not help writing about them. Besides, what is written has sometimes a greater effect than what is spoken; at least, we can keep the former by us, and recall it to our memories from time to time. I wonder whether you will do this with my advice to-day.

'Now may God bless you both, my children, and guard you not only from evil actions, but from evil words, and, even more, from evil thoughts. It is the daily and nightly—the hourly prayer of Your most affectionate MOTHER.'

'Mamma knows what school is like very well,' said Ruth, when she had finished the letter. 'Clara began talking very wrongly some days ago, only I stopped her; and since then she always leaves off of herself, if I come near, when she is rattling on in her wild, bad way.'

'I don't know quite what you mean by a bad way,' said Madeline, 'and I don't think I understand what mamma means. I hope I never say wrong things without knowing it.'

Ruth laughed.

'How can you, Maddy? Mamma says that we always feel whether things are right or not. You can tell whether you ever say what you would not like Mrs Carter to hear.'

'I am not sure. I don't think I do,' said Madeline, musingly, 'but I should like to go home to ask mamma more about it.'

'There is nothing to ask about, that I can see,' was Ruth's rather hasty reply.

'We are not to say things we are ashamed of, and not to read books we are forbidden. There is nothing very difficult in that. There must be, though,' said Madeline, speaking more to herself than to her sister; 'because mamma has written so much about it. It must be very wrong to do so.'

Digitized by Google

'Yes, of course, it is very wrong; but we need not do it; nothing is easier.'

Ruth put the letter into her desk, and went to the piano to practise.

Madeline thought for a few seconds; and then, as school had not yet begun, stole quietly to the dressing-room and prayed, standing reverently, with her hand before her eyes, that God would aid her to remember and follow her mamma's advice.

The day passed over very much as other days. True, Anna Grant was gone, her place was vacant: but in the busy world of school-life there was little leisure for regret. Some missed Anna, some thought about her; one or two mentioned her; but all contrived to manage their own affairs without her. Madeline was one of those who thought. She could not in an instant forget the shock of such a sudden event. She could not help remembering that Anna must be anxious, perhaps very miserable; but when she made observations upon the subject to her schoolfellows, the greater number turned away as if they took but little interest in it. Their attention was given to themselves—to the daily lessons —the half-yearly exercise—the chance of a prize; and—what was always an excitement for the day—a visit from Justine Le Vergnier. Ruth, Alice, and Mary Vernon were the only parties who expressed little or no pleasure when it was said that Justine was invited. Janet Harding, indeed, as usual, began to criticise what she called her odd French ways; but she owned that it was very amusing to listen to her; and she supposed there was some excuse to be made for her, because she had been brought up in another country. Ruth had imbibed Mary Vernon's doubt of Justine; and Alice could not bear to see any one who reminded her of the disagreeable fact that she was in a certain degree, and by her own weakness, involved in Clara's bad conduct. But Justine came, and in the general satisfaction which her presence gave, individual feelings were little noticed. Clara was foremost as her friend; but that seemed natural. Clara was foremost in all cases if she could manage it; and no one, except Florence, Harriet, and Alice, suspected that anything particular was meant by the smiles and looks which passed between them. They walked late, for the weather was very warm, and when they returned, Madeline, who had a good deal to do for the next day, said she intended to remain in the school-room till bed-time. One or two others talked of doing the same. Ruth seldom found it necessary to work at extra hours; she was almost always before-

Digitized by Google

hand with her studies; and Madeline could not refrain from a sigh as she saw her sister take a story-book into the parlour, whilst she was obliged to occupy herself with a dull exercise. It was with rather a wandering attention that she began; she could not find the right place; she had forgotten the dictionary; and, then, to the annoyance of her companions, she began to search for it, upsetting at the same time a pile of books laid upon the desk.

'What a fidget Madeline is!' exclaimed Fanny Wilson, 'Why don't you sit down quietly, Maddy? No one can do a thing whilst you shake so.'

Madeline tried to be patient, both with herself and others, and took up the fallen volumes carefully, one by one, looking at each as she put them down. There were grammars, histories, geography books, all but the one she wanted; and there was another—a strange book, not a lesson-book—Madeline could not help exclaiming, as she opened it, 'Whose is this? Where did it come from?'

Fanny Wilson looked up, and the rest said: 'What is the matter?' but no one seemed to care; they were all too busy. Madeline sought for the name in the title page; but could not find it. She saw it was marked at the back as belonging to a circulating library; and supposed therefore that it must have been brought there by Mrs Carter or Miss Barnard.

'Fanny, you are going into the parlour presently,' she said, 'do take this book in, will you?'

'All those books are Florence Trevelyan's,' said Fanny.

'No, indeed, this one is not; it cannot be.'

'Florence put them all there herself just now,' said Fanny, without raising her eyes; 'pray, let them stay.'

Madeline was still certain that she was right; and being rather determined to prove that she was so, took up the volume with the intention of delivering it to Mrs Carter. At the parlour-door she was met by Justine and Florence. Their eyes glanced instantly upon the book.

Justine exclaimed, 'O Ciel!' and Florence put out her hand to seize it, saying—

'This is not yours, Madeline; where did you find it?'

Madeline explained.

'How very stupid of me!' whispered Florence to Justine. 'What shall we do?'

'Don't say it is yours,' replied Justine, in the same voice.

Digitized by Google

'I have said it, all but;' and then speaking aloud to Madeline, Florence added, 'Give me the book, Madeline; it is my concern, not yours.'

Madeline looked astonished, and said it could not belong to Florence; it was a library book.

'Just give it me, Maddy; there's a good child. I will take care of it.'

'Yes, surely; it belongs to Florence,' remarked Justine, finding that it would not serve their purpose to deny the fact.

Madeline still hesitated.

'Circulating library books cannot be yours, Florence.'

'Yes, this one is; do give it me. Why will you be troublesome?'

Miss Barnard at that instant appeared at the head of the staircase.

'This way; do not stand talking there,' said Justine, impatiently, and she led the way to the dressing-room, closed the door, and exclaimed—

'O Madeline! tu es bonne, aimable, permets que je le tienne.'

Justine took hold of the book so gently, and spoke so softly, that Madeline, little in the habit of opposing any one, especially Justine, did not resist. She gave up the point; and Justine, uttering vehement expressions of gratitude, glanced at Florence with a smile of triumph, and was going away; but Florence appeared less satisfied, and whispered—

'Wait, Justine, wait. Madeline knows now; do ask her not to tell.'

'Surely,' replied Justine, as if the request was a matter of course, 'Madeline will not say anything. The book is not hers; there is no reason she should talk of it.'

'If you would only tell me why,' answered Madeline, quite puzzled.

'Why? oh, no reason, nothing particular,' said Florence, unable to find any satisfactory answer; 'but we wish it. Just say that you will not mention the book, that is all.'

Madeline thought for an instant, and then replied that she did not like to make promises; she could not understand what they wanted, and she would rather not. Justine placed herself before the door.

'Madeline, chère petite!' she began; 'écoutes pour un moment.'

Digitized by Google

Madeline paused very willingly. It was really difficult to her to do anything which seemed ill-natured. Justine proceeded rapidly in a mingled jargon of English and French; entreating, urging, protesting, there was no harm, no cause exactly for concealment; only she wished it. She should be wretched if Madeline did not promise: ending with a sentence which had a great effect upon Madeline—'Ah, que je t'aime, et tu me feras malheureuse!'

After this, Madeline could scarcely say no. It might be some private affair of Justine's; something in which, as she said, there was no harm. The hesitation was evident.

'She will promise; she has promised,' exclaimed Justine, turning to Florence; 'how we shall both love her!'

Justine threw her arm caressingly round Madeline, but Madeline did not feel exactly inclined to return the embrace.

'Let her say the word,' said Florence, in rather a sulky tone.

'Oh no, we will trust,' replied Justine, with a sweet smile. 'She is so gentle, so good;' and unfastening a very pretty little brooch, she placed it in Madeline's hands, adding, as she kissed her, that she must keep it as a 'gage d'amitié.'

Madeline was so taken by surprise by this action, that she had not presence of mind to determine whether to accept or return the ornament; and even before she could express her thanks, Justine was gone, and Florence Trevelyan with her. Madeline stood with the brooch in her hand, feeling extremely uncomfortable; bound by an implied promise, without in the least intending it; and the promise sealed by a gift. What should she do? Ruth naturally came to her remembrance; she would ask her advice; but no, that could not be; it would be breaking her promise. Yet she had not made a promise, but then Justine trusted her; Justine fully believed she had. Madeline had seldom found it so difficult to decide what was right to be done. It struck her whether it would not be proper to return the brooch. Yet why should she do so? Justine had not given it her as a bribe; that would really be shocking. She had spoken of loving her, and of the gift being a mark of affection: there could be no harm in that. Madeline examined the brooch; it was very elegant; and she had never possessed a brooch before. It would be useful also; brooches were much more useful than rings. She only wished Ruth could have one like it. These thoughts passed very quickly through

Digitized by Google

her mind, and as they passed, they strengthened the wish, which before was but slight, of retaining the brooch. She might show it to Ruth, and say that Justine gave it her, without mentioning the book. Certainly, Madeline might have done this; nothing would have been easier; but she had been brought up in habits of perfect sincerity; anything approaching to deceit was contrary to this habit: it was unnatural and painful; and Madeline had scarcely resolved that she would keep the brooch, before she repented the resolution, and began to reconsider it. Fanny Wilson happened to come in while she was yet undecided. The brooch was in her hand, and Fanny remarked it; inquired whose it was, and how she came by it. Madeline had but one answer to give—that it was Justine's present; and Fanny wondered and admired, and thought how extremely fond Justine must be of Madeline, and then ran away to tell the news to her companions. Madeline's time was just then particularly precious to her: yet she could not make up her mind to go back to her lessons; she felt so very uncomfortable. If it were not for the brooch, all would be easy; but as it was, what would it be best to do?

The temptations natural to us from the dispositions with which we are born, follow us through our whole lives. Madeline was now in natural taste what she had always been. She had still a liking for ornaments and finery. But she was not, as once, the silly, thoughtless child, giving way quickly, and not having strength to draw back. No one can begin acting upon religious principles very early in life as she had done, without acquiring a firmness of character and clearness of conscience, which others, who leave religion till they are advanced in years, often strive for in vain. God's special blessing attends those who give themselves to His service in childhood. And Madeline, with all her faults, carelessness, love of finery, hastiness of temper, was yet a child of God, not only because she was made His at her baptism, but because it was her earnest endeavour to strive against her faults and to please Him. A quick sense of right and wrong was Madeline's great blessing. It warned her now to stop; to pray for the help of God; to ask herself whether, even supposing there was no positive harm in keeping the brooch, it would not be safer to give it back; whether she would not then be more free to act as she thought right. It was no duty to keep it—it might be a duty to return it. In such cases the safest way is the best way of deciding.

Digitized by Google

Madeline resolved that she would give back the brooch before Justine went away that evening.

It was a sacrifice undoubtedly, but she did not hesitate. She unfastened the brooch—without trusting herself to look at it again; put it up in paper, and was on her way back to the school-room, when in the passage—she encountered her sister. Ruth's face was flushed and eager, and her step quick: she ran up to Madeline, and said: 'Justine has given you a brooch, Maddy; but you must return it, you must not keep it for the world.'

'I am not going to do it,' replied Madeline, quietly. 'But what do you know about it? Why ought I to return it?'

'Alice says so,' replied Ruth. 'She came to me into the parlour and told me, and said, that you had better not have anything to do with Justine, for that you would get into trouble if you did, and she begged me to come and stop you.'

'Thank you, Ruth, dear,' replied Madeline, in the same simple, unconcerned tone. 'I think Alice is right; I do not mean to keep the brooch; I am sure it is better not; but it was very kind in Justine to give it me.'

'Perhaps so, but I don't like her; she is up to mischief; she and Florence, and Harriet, and that dreadful Clara.'

Madeline showed some surprise at these words. The last expression was very unlike the gentle, mild, forgiving Ruth.

'Clara Manners will be the ruin of the school, Maddy,' continued Ruth; 'but I will find her out. I will know what it is she is at, some way. But, tell me, what made Justine give you the brooch?'

'I cannot tell,' replied Madeline; 'at least, not till I have spoken to Justine and Florence.'

'Not tell me, Maddy! Why, I am your sister; you tell me everything.'

'Yes, so I do, and I mean you to know, but I must speak to Justine first; I must give her back the brooch. She would call me mean else.'

'It must be something very wrong, if you are not to talk about it to me,' said Ruth, with some irritation in her tone. 'But you can tell me one thing. Was it about a book? I cannot help thinking that is the secret, because I am nearly sure I saw Justine draw out a book from under her shawl, and give it to Florence.'

'I had rather not speak about it till I have seen Justine,'

Digitized by Google

answered Madeline, decidedly. 'When I have, you shall hear all I know; not that I really know anything.'

'And then, Florence carried another book up-stairs this morning,' said Ruth. 'She was very mysterious, and so was Clara. The secret must be about a book. Justine is bringing in books secretly. How extremely wrong!'

Madeline withdrew from her sister, and went on to the school-room, unwilling to betray by her face the belief that Ruth had guessed rightly.

Ruth stood thinking; full of excitement, curiosity, and—shall it be said?—revenge. She felt that she had guessed rightly. If she had not, Madeline would have said something to prove it. Clara Manners was doing what Mrs Carter most particularly disapproved. No rule was more strictly maintained than that which forbade any books, even from the different homes, to be read in the school-room without Mrs Carter's approval. If Clara were known to encourage any such practices, her influence, supposing she had any, would be at an end. Her threats against Ruth would be powerless. Ruth was resolved to discover and to expose Clara's conduct. How, was a mystery yet to be solved.

While she was leaning in a musing attitude against the balustrade at the foot of the stairs, Mrs Carter came out of the parlour. 'Ruth, my dear,' she said, 'Dawson is gone out; I wish you would go up-stairs for me, and take up Florence and Harriet's new bonnets; I am afraid of their being spoiled if they are left below.' Ruth ran quickly up the stairs, with a feeling at her heart which she did not examine, but it was satisfaction; the thought that by some means she might now have an opportunity of examining into the secret. The request seemed quite singular, coming at such a moment.

She deposited the bonnets carefully in the closet, and then looked round the room. Its appearance was very much as usual—just the same books were lying on the drawers, everything was very neat. Ruth took up the books, and moved some boxes, feeling half ashamed of herself as she did so. Conscience whispered that she was seeking to gratify her own evil temper, not to please Mrs Carter. Still there was nothing to be seen, and Ruth was going away, provoked with herself for having spent time to no purpose, when it struck her that she might as well search carefully in the closet, amongst the shawls, and dresses, and handkerchiefs. No place was more likely to be

Digitized by Google

chosen for a hiding-place; for Dawson was the only person who ever went there, and there was not much fear of her making a remark about books. Ruth searched with considerable trouble; carefully replacing the different articles, that it might not be seen they had been touched. That alone was disagreeable to her—to be taking pains not to be found out. Still she went on; now that she had begun, there seemed the more reason for doing so; and all the time she said to herself that it was wrong to allow things to be done which Mrs Carter might disapprove; it was her duty to find out the truth. But was it Ruth's duty? Was it her place to be prying and searching amongst things which did not belong to her? Was it her duty to act in a manner which she was ashamed of? Would it not have been the most straightforward course to have gone at once to Mrs Carter, though with the risk of being blamed for suspicion, in case nothing were discovered against Clara? Ruth wished to gratify her spite, and yet avoid the possibility of censure. The indulgence of the one great fault of her character had lowered her tone of mind, so that she could not see the path of duty. That is one reason why it is so necessary to strive against all our faults; because if we give way to any one, it will certainly lead us into others. The closet had been examined with much care, and Ruth began to think once more of departing. She was moving a set of shawls in the farthest extremity; it was not probable that anything should be there; they were too tidily folded one upon another for a hiding-place; but Ruth pushed them aside merely to be quite sure, and, as she did so, she felt something hard wrapped in one. Her curiosity and suspicion were awakened in an instant. The shawls were drawn out, unfolded, and in the middle of one was found a book; *the* book Ruth was certain it must be! the book which Justine had brought Clara. Ruth opened it at the title-page. It was called a novel—she scarcely knew what that meant—a translation from the French. She looked at one or two of the pages, merely from curiosity, to see what the story was like. It seemed very interesting, and there was a good deal of conversation in it. Ruth liked conversations particularly. She read down a page, fancying that she was only wishing to discover whether there was any harm in the book. The sentence finished on the other side, and she turned over the leaf. Then it seemed still more interesting. She must go on a very little way; and the very little way became a longer

Digitized by Google

way; the longer way became a chapter; the chapter became two—still Ruth read. And what did she read? what good principle did she gain? Ruth felt all the time that she was reading something wrong. She could not have told why; she could not have explained a great deal that met her eye; but the quick instinct which God had given her by nature, which He gives to us all when we are very young, made her conscious that the book was one of which her mamma would disapprove. Ruth was conscious, but she did not stop to consider her own feelings. There is nothing more enticing than reading. Our eye catches a word a few lines beyond the part we have begun; almost before we are aware of it, we are there. We say we will leave off, but the same thing happens again, and all the time we are not aware how quickly the minutes are passing; and our sense of duty is deadened by the interest of the scenes described. Those short minutes may do mischief which the labour of years cannot undo. They may give us a knowledge of evil things which otherwise we might never have known, and the knowledge of evil does in itself border upon sin. When we doubt whether we are right, then is the instant to stop—to close the book—to turn from the conversation.

If Ruth's highest principles had then been acted upon, this she would have done instantly; but she had yielded to one temptation, and she fell under another. When the shadows of evening had deepened; when it was dark, so that she could scarcely tell the words, Ruth laid down the book, and asked herself what she had done. That clear awakening of the conscience to the knowledge that we have committed some particular offence for the first time, how keen, how overpowering it is! It pierced Ruth's heart with the sharpness of a dagger. She had sinned. She had done what, till that hour, she had never been tempted to do. She had been warned that very day; her mother's words were still fresh in her memory; yet she had offended. The fleeting pleasure was over, the enduring pain remained. Ruth did not cry; she was too oppressed for tears. She did not think of going to Mrs Carter and owning what she had done. Images of the persons of whom she had been reading filled her brain. She seemed to have been admitted into a new world, to which, even in the midst of her shame and confusion, she longed to return. Then came the heavy, burdensome sense of guilt; the fear of being found out; the humiliating, degrading recollection, that she who had entered the room

Digitized by Google

bent upon discovering the fault of another, was now a sharer in the same offence.

Presently she fancied that some one called her name. She ran into her own room with the book still in her hand, and listened again. She was not called, but a footstep was heard upon the lobby, and without further consideration, Ruth opened the nearest drawer, one in which Janet Harding's winter dresses were put away, and thrust the volume beneath a cloak. The footstep passed her room, it sounded up the attic stairs. It could only be a servant, but Ruth was so entirely bewildered, nervous, and frightened, that she could not stop to arrange her ideas, and ran down to the parlour in the dread lest the next instant should bring some one to look for and discover her. Candles were just being lighted. No one was thinking of Ruth; no one was watching her. Only Mary Vernon asked if she was not well, she was so silent. Ruth had a headache;—yes, a very bad, throbbing headache. But she had a worse pain than that—the pain of an aching heart.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE bright sun shone cheerfully into the front bedrooms of Mrs Carter's house the following morning. It was six o'clock; the bell sounded to waken the family. Ruth slowly unclosed her eyes. Her eyelids were pressed down with sleep; her dreams had been disturbed; a weight lay upon her heart; she did not rise at once as was her custom. A change seemed to have come upon herself and upon everything about her. At length she summoned resolution to get up. Over the blind of the window the front entrance could be seen, and beyond it the high road, and an opposite house and garden. It was precisely what she had beheld the day before; the sounds were precisely what she had heard; the rumbling dray-cart, the light rattling cab, the early cries, and the sounds below in the house; the unbarring of doors, unfastening of shutters: all was the same outwardly. But alas! Ruth's feelings told too truly that it was not the same to her. Life is made up not of events, but of actions, and thoughts, and feelings. Our lives, the life of each individual, is not what has happened to him, but what he

Digitized by Google

has done and thought. So a man lives as truly in a dungeon as on a throne; his life is to himself in its eternal consequences equally important. So the Almighty Lord, 'who only knoweth the hearts of the children of men,' looks with the same interest upon the beggar and the prince, for He sees that both are passing through the same conflict, both hurrying to the same end—Eternity.

This new day of Ruth's life was new in a sense which no mere outward change of circumstances could make it. It was a day of new trial.

Ruth had done wrong; she had offended against her mother's warnings—against Mrs Carter's rules; she had sinned in the sight of God. Yet the offence was not of that grievous nature to render her despairing of her own principles, or doubtful of forgiveness. It was her peculiar character which made it so serious. There was one simple course for Ruth to adopt—the acknowledgment of her fault to Mrs Carter. In one sense it would have been easier now to blame her companions than before: in accusing them she would accuse herself also. But accuse herself!—it was the last idea likely to enter Ruth's mind. She, to whom all looked up, who was admired—praised! She, who was certain of a prize, certain of being made first in the school! No; others who had nothing to lose might accuse themselves, but not Ruth. Still something must be done, and soon. When Ruth went down-stairs, she saw Clara and Florence watching her. They were evidently annoyed, and they seemed suspicious. Ruth knew they must have missed the book; but she was safe from any inquiries as long as she did not betray anything by her countenance. Her spirits became more and more depressed as the business of the day went on. The interest which she usually found in her studies was over, for she could give them only a divided attention. Again and again the idea of confessing what she had done presented itself, and it might have been entertained and acted upon but for one circumstance: that morning's post brought the intelligence of the death of Anna Grant's father, and the certain announcement that she would not return to school. After the first expression of sympathy was given, some one named Anna's office—that which she was to have had. It was merely a casual, passing observation, but Ruth heard it though she was sitting at a distance from the speaker; she heard it, felt it—felt that many eyes were directed to her;

Digitized by Google

felt that every one was thinking of her. The flush of pride was on her cheek; one moment's thought, and there came a sudden, sharp pang at her heart—a deep, deep shame. The flush was gone, and her cheek and lips grew white. It was the sign of an inward struggle, of conscious humiliation and determined pride, and pride was victorious. Ruth thought no more in earnest of confession.

'What shall I do about the brooch, Ruth?' said Madeline, when the morning lessons were over. 'I had not an opportunity of giving it back to Justine last night, and I don't at all like to keep it.'

'The brooch!' repeated Ruth, wonderingly; 'oh; I remember. Yes, of course, you must give it back. Was that Florence who went out of the room with Clara?'

'No; it was Fanny Wilson. Ruth, dear, what is the matter? You look so pale?'

Ruth answered that her head ached; it had been aching all day.

'Don't worry about that exercise, then,' said Madeline. 'Come and sit upon the window-seat with me, and have a talk till dinner-time.'

Ruth followed mechanically, but instead of talking she rubbed her finger up and down the pane of glass, hunting the flies from spot to spot; and fixed her eye upon a particular shrub in the garden, from which she scarcely once removed it. Madeline began the conversation without thinking much of Ruth's silence; the headache sufficiently accounted for it. It was a great pleasure to Madeline to be alone with her sister, and tell out all her little grievances, her hopes, and anxieties. Madeline felt as if Ruth must be at least a year older than herself, for she seemed always able to give her advice, and was often the means of preventing her from committing great mistakes. This time Madeline had one particular care which she was half ashamed to confess, even to Ruth. It was the consequence of the old fault, carelessness. She had kept her accounts less strictly of late, and, before the holidays, Mrs Carter was accustomed to look at the account-books. She was not angry if they were not correct, but she was much pleased if they were, and Madeline had set her heart upon doing well in everything. She had been trying very hard to remember all she had spent, but the money would not come right by eighteenpence. Reckoning what she had bought, and what she believed was owed to her, still the eighteenpence remained a mystery.

Digitized by Google

'And it is not like a little sum, Ruth,' she said. 'It is not like a penny, which I could have lost. Eighteenpence is such a great deal; I cannot think what has become of it.'

'But are you sure you have searched for it properly?' asked Ruth. 'I mean, are you sure that no one owes it you?'

'Yes, very nearly; I think I know all. There is Fanny Wilson's sixpence, and Jessie's twopence for the cakes, and a penny which Janet Harding borrowed the last time the fruit woman came, and the shilling I lent Alice at Richmond. I cannot remember anything else.'

'Then take my advice, Maddy,' said Ruth. 'Make them all pay you to-day; then you will have it right as far as you can, and very likely in settling with them you will remember something about the eighteenpence. I often remember when I begin in that way, though I may have quite forgotten before.'

Madeline thought the notion a good one, and, jumping down from the window-seat, was upon the point of addressing Janet, when some one said that Justine was in the passage. She had brought a parcel from her father. Madeline's thoughts immediately returned to the brooch, for she could not be quite happy till it was given back. She left her sentence to Janet half-finished, and ran out of the room. Justine had laid her parcel upon the hall table, and was about to go into the dressing-room. Jessie O'Neile was with her, and Madeline heard Justine tell her to go very quietly into the school-room, and whisper to Clara that she wanted to speak with her. Jessie ran away, and Justine went into the dressing-room. Madeline did not quite like to follow; not that she repented her resolution, but it seemed ungracious. She knew herself how annoyed she should be at having a present returned: but this was the only opportunity she might have for several days; and summoning all her strength of mind, she boldly pushed open the door. Justine was standing with her back towards her, and exclaimed—

'Ah, Claire!'

'It is not Clara,' said Madeline, blushing and awkwardly holding out the brooch.

'Ah! chère petite!' and Justine came forward to kiss her.

Madeline submitted to the kiss, but tried to disengage herself, and, putting the brooch before Justine, she said—

'I am very much obliged for this; I think it beautiful; but, if you please, I had rather not have it, if you don't mind.'

Justine's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

Digitized by Google

'Tiens! impossible! qu'as tu, mignonne?'

'I would rather not, if you please,' said Madeline, whose courage was returning, now that the first step was taken. 'I should be more happy without it; and, Justine, I did not make the promise, though you said I did.'

Justine's surprise still continued. She could not understand what Madeline wished or meant to say.

'Ecoutes!' she began. At that instant Clara threw back the door, and rushed eagerly into the room.

'It is all over with us, Justine!'—then seeing Madeline she stopped and corrected herself. 'School is just over. So you are come at the exact moment. Maddy, I heard Ruth asking for you a minute ago. She wants you, I suspect.'

Madeline, too glad of an excuse for departing, put the brooch on the table, pushed it towards Justine, and departed without another word. When she was gone, Clara allowed no time for Justine to speak. She was full of her own fears; the second volume of the novel was gone from the closet—where, she could not imagine. Neither Florence nor Harriet knew anything about it. They could get nothing from Alice. They half suspected Ruth; yet Ruth could not have told Mrs Carter, because nothing had been said about it, and the book had been missed the previous night.

'Perhaps it is one of the servants,' continued Clara; 'but I cannot guess which. No one but Dawson ever goes there, and I don't think she would have taken it away. We are in a great fuss about it; my only hope is that Florence has made a mistake; that she did not carry it up-stairs, though she fancies she did, and that it is mislaid.'

'But Madame does not know,' said Justine, 'so there is no fear yet at any rate.'

Clara could not see this; but Justine thrust the subject aside, and brought forward that upon which she was peculiarly interested herself—the subscriptions. 'She must,' she said, 'have all the money paid at once; the woman at the shop was urgent.'

'I have paid my share; all I agreed to pay,' said Clara. 'I am not going to give any more.'

'But you have not all paid,' replied Justine. 'Some one has not.'

'It is Alice's stupidity,' said Clara. 'We reckoned upon her, and she would not join us. I don't see what is to be done. I

Digitized by Google

am sure I will not pay any more, and I know that Harriet and Florence have not a farthing.'

'Ah! mais—que ferons nous?' asked Justine in alarm.

'I don't know; it is all Alice. We cannot manage without her.'

'Where is she?' inquired Justine.

'In the school-room, or somewhere—I don't know where. What was the business between you and Madeline about the brooch?'

Justine repeated what had passed, and Clara's brow grew dark with fear and annoyance.

'That tiresome child!' she exclaimed. 'I would rather have to manage any one in the school, even Ruth, than her. You can never make her see things your way. She will do us mischief somehow.'

'But the subscriptions,' interposed Justine. 'I am to go home directly, and I must take the money with me.'

'The only thing to be done that I can see,' replied Clara, after a moment's thought, is to get hold of Alice and frighten her. Happily there are some visitors just gone into the drawing-room, so we shall not have dinner just this minute.'

'Hâtes-toi, donc,' exclaimed Justine, and Clara did hasten. She went instantly to the school-room, and summoning Alice from her employment, informed her, in an under-tone, that Justine wanted to speak with her very particularly. Alice was reckoning up the marks for the good-conduct prize; only two were deficient. With common care she was sure of it. Her heart bounded with satisfaction as she thought of this. Lady Catharine now would really see that she had been trying. Clara's voice disturbed her pleasant thoughts: it was always associated with something disagreeable. She asked what she was wanted for, pleaded business, and said that she did not wish to go; but Clara insisted, and Alice, having no real excuse, was compelled to obey. Clara closed the door of the dressing-room, and stood against it, so that no one could enter, and then, breaking suddenly into the middle of Justine's civil speeches, she opened the business. But it could scarcely be called opening. Clara knew Alice sufficiently to be aware of the best mode of dealing with her, and at once, abruptly, as if asking only a matter of right, she demanded her share of the subscription for the library books. Poor Alice stood silent, overcome by the suddenness and boldness of the request.

Digitized by Google

'Mais tu es gauche,' interrupted Justine. 'Alice, mignonne!'——

'No, no,' exclaimed Clara; 'leave the matter to me. Alice, you know very well that it is owing; I have spoken to you about it before.'

'Before! where?' exclaimed Alice with indignation. 'You never spoke to me; I always told you I would have nothing to do with it.'

Clara placed her hand quietly on Alice's shoulder.

'You never said that when you read with us on the Sunday afternoon?'

Alice pushed aside the hand, and answered, with flashing eyes—

'Clara, you deceived me. You showed me the book, but you told me nothing about paying.'

'I trusted to your honour,' said Clara, in the same quiet manner.

Alice burst into tears.

'I have no money,' she said. 'I owe all to Madeline, if I had it; but Florence will not pay, so I actually have none.'

'I will lend it you,' said Clara.

Alice partially recovered her self-command, and remained for a few moments thinking. Justine approached her with a fondling gesture, but Alice stood quite passive.

'Here is Florence Trevelyan,' said Clara, as some one gave two gentle taps at the door; 'her wits will never help us.'

Florence came in with a look of idle vacuity and curiosity. She knew something secret was going on, and she was determined to find out what it was.

'No secret,' said Clara, contemptuously; 'but we are all in a mess. Alice refuses to pay.'

'No, Clara, no,' exclaimed Alice; 'I do not refuse to pay, but I say that you have no right to ask me.'

'Depêchez-vous, mes amies,' began Justine, playfully.

'I shall go,' said Alice, withdrawing herself from Justine.

'Nay, excuse me,' interposed Clara, standing directly in front of her: 'we cannot let you off quite so easily, Alice. We will soon manage to inform the whole school how they may trust you. To be mean! I would not be mean for the world.'

'It is just as mean in Florence not to pay me my eighteenpence,' said Alice.

Clara caught up the words.

Digitized by Google

'Not to repay you your eighteenpence! Would you give it, then, if you had it?'

'I don't know; I would not be mean; perhaps—I can't tell—I owe it to Madeline.'

'Nonsense! owe it to Madeline!' exclaimed Clara. 'Why, you can pay her at any time—when you go home—there is not the least hurry. If the money were yours, would you let us have it?'

'I cannot say; it is not mine,' replied Alice, and a look of bewilderment crossed her face.

'It would be right to give it, there is no question of that,' said Clara; 'is there, Justine? Alice read the book, and now she is bound to pay for the pleasure.'

Justine entirely agreed.

'You would not like Justine to think you mean?' said Clara

'I should not like any one to think me mean,' answered Alice; 'I could not bear to be thought it; but I have not a farthing. If you would give me the world I cannot pay.

'But Florence owes you eighteenpence. Let her off that, and then it shall go for your share, and she and I will settle the subscription now without you. We have some little money affairs together.'

'I cannot think what I shall say to Madeline,' said Alice, who found her resolution beginning to fail.

'Say nothing; leave it to chance, and trust to Madeline's good-nature; she will never tease you about such a trifle.'

'And it would be very kind to me,' observed Florence.

'How absurd! Florence,' exclaimed Clara. 'Kind to you! How can there be any particular kindness in Alice's paying what is due?'

Alice looked extremely angry, but Clara gave her no opportunity for expressing what she felt; and taking the money required from her own purse, she gave it to Justine, saying to Florence as she did so—

'Then we are quits, Florence, now. You have paid your share, and so have Harriet and I; and, besides, you ought to pay for Alice, instead of returning the eighteenpence.'

'But I cannot,' interrupted Florence, in a tone of alarm.

'Well, don't be frightened. I have settled it, because I owe you for the fruit and cakes you bought for me the other day. Do you understand?'

It was quite necessary to ask this question, as Florence was

Digitized by Google

famed for dulness in all matters of reckoning. She did not now clearly comprehend such a very intricate mode of arrangement, and Clara was obliged to explain still further. Even then Florence was puzzled; the only impression remaining on her mind being that she was free, and that in some way Madeline was implicated. Alice would still have drawn back, if possible, but Clara silenced her by saying that the case was settled; and the summons being given for dinner, the party in the dressing-room separated, not, however, before Justine had given Alice 'mille remercimens' for her good-nature.

Alice met Madeline, when they went into the dining-room, with a very painful feeling; a sense of shame, a consciousness of having been unjust, almost dishonest. She had consented to give up money which did not in fact belong to her, because she could not brave the taunts of Clara Manners, and dreaded to be called mean. True, she intended to repay Madeline, but this would not be in her power for some time, and in the meanwhile she must make excuses—false excuses—for she could not own the real truth. Alice was full of these unpleasant thoughts the whole of dinner-time, trying to determine what she should say to Madeline; angry with herself for having so weakly yielded to a claim which was not just, and still more angry, even vexed and sorrowful, at the remembrance of the first fault which had brought her into the difficulty. And all Alice's troubles were increased by one great defect in her character; very common—at first sight, not very important—but most certain to do infinite harm to all who indulge it. Alice was deficient in moral courage—the courage necessary to be straightforward. It was in this especially that she was inferior to Madeline; the difference could be seen in their manner. When Madeline had done wrong, she would blush and tremble, but she would look up and speak out without faltering; and, as she spoke, every one felt that her lightest word was to be depended on. When Alice had done wrong, her eyes were downcast, her voice was hesitating, her sentences were broken. It was only by questions that the truth could be brought out, and then Alice often corrected herself, and made mistakes, and at last was obliged to own the whole truth, merely because she had become so confused that it was the only way left her of escape from perplexity. So, in the present instance, the last idea which presented itself to Alice's mind was that of simply stating the truth; and saying to Madeline that

Digitized by Google

she had lost the change given her at Richmond, and had paid away the money with which she intended to replace it. Alice fancied that if she did this, some mischief would arise. Madeline would inquire, or suspect; something would happen, she did not know what. No; she must excuse herself, delay, borrow from some one else, anything rather than the easiest, best way of arranging the affair. Madeline touched Alice's arm as they were waiting in the hall, preparing for the afternoon's walk, and said—

'Alice, could you attend to me for one moment?'

Alice found her heart throb, and was ashamed of herself for her cowardice.

'There is not time now,' she said, for she was certain that Madeline was going to ask for her money.

'Well, then, when we come in, if you can. I want to settle accounts with you. Mrs Carter will look at the books to-morrow, and mine are not right.'

'Very well.'

Alice felt the delay of an hour and a half to be a reprieve; but the prospect of the conversation made her very uncomfortable. Clara came near and whispered—

'Alice, what are you thinking of?' There was no answer; Alice moved away and Clara followed. 'I know, Alice; you need not run away from me.'

'Yes, I do need,' replied Alice, bitterly. 'It is you, Clara, who always make me miserable.'

'Miserable! what a word! What should you be miserable about?'

'Madeline wants her money,' replied Alice.

'How do you know that?'

'Because she told me; and what can I say to her?'

'Madeline does not want her money,' replied Clara. 'I know more about it than you do.'

'How? what do you mean?'

'She wants the shilling, not the half-crown.'

'But have you spoken to her? have you told her?' exclaimed Alice.

Clara laughed.—'No; trust me for being so foolish as that; but I know still; I have heard her talking. She cannot make her accounts come right, and she thinks she has lost the eighteenpence. She does not know that she lent it to you. She must have given it to you by mistake.'

Digitized by Google

'But what difference can that make to me?'

'Simply, that you need not tell. If she is so careless, she deserves to be punished for it.'

'O Clara! how shocking! how dreadful!' exclaimed Alice. 'It would be as bad as stealing.'

Alice spoke so loudly that several of her companions heard her. Clara stopped her instantly.

'Alice, are you mad?' she said, and Alice was instantly subdued. 'You will ruin us all,' continued Clara, reproachfully; 'I would give worlds if we had nothing at all to do with you. How can you think I should dream of stealing?'

'You said as much,' said Alice.

'No, I did not. I meant nothing of the kind. All that I said was, that if Madeline was careless she deserved to be punished.'

'But you implied that I need not tell her about the eighteenpence,' said Alice.

'Yes, of course I did; but there is no stealing in that. You may pay her when you get home. You need not keep the money in the end.'

'Only not tell her now,' said Alice, thinking.

'Yes; not let her know of the mistake. She won't really care, and Mrs Carter will not think more of it than usual, for Madeline's accounts are never right.'

'But it will make Madeline unhappy,' said Alice; 'she will fret about it.'

'Oh! no, she will not; she thinks it lost; and she will soon be satisfied. It is but a very little pain for her, and for you it might be the greatest mischief possible. Something would be sure to be found out, if Mrs Carter were to inquire why you did not repay the money.'

Alice almost wished it might be; this continued concealment, this being placed under Clara's power, subject to her threats and her entreaties, was more painful than any punishment inflicted by Mrs Carter could have been. Still her cowardice stood in the way. It seemed safe to say nothing, and it was not dishonest. Alice's conscience misgave her. Was that quite true? was it not dishonest? Though Madeline might not be worse off in the end, would she not be worse off now? And was it certain that she should be able to pay her when they went home? Lady Catharine was not much in the habit of giving her money, and she could not ask for it. An inquiry would

Digitized by Google

then be made why it was wanted, and something might be discovered of the truth. Of all things Alice dreaded Lady Catharine's knowing that she had done anything wrong in money affairs; it was a subject about which she was particularly strict. Her own bills were paid monthly; she was quite annoyed and uncomfortable if this was not done, and she had often warned Alice against that very common species of dishonesty in young persons, the running in debt for articles for which they cannot afford the purchase, or which, if they are paid for in the end, must in the meantime cause inconvenience and perhaps loss to another. Alice knew, she was quite certain, that Clara's plan was a wrong one. She said, 'No, it could not be: she would not listen to it.'

They returned from their walk. Alice took off her dress quickly, and went to the school-room. Madeline hastened after her; her bright, open face clouded by annoyance. She asked Alice for the shilling which she had lent her at Richmond. Alice gave it. Madeline lamented the loss of her eighteenpence. She begged Alice to help her in discovering what had been done with it; and Alice hid her face under pretence of searching in her desk. Madeline went on lamenting and wondering; and Alice replied, 'I am very sorry.' Madeline kissed her, and thanked her, and said—'Alice, you are always sorry for any one in trouble.'

Then Alice's heart did indeed reproach her; but courage, moral courage, oh! how sad it is to be deficient in it! Alice allowed Madeline to leave her under a false impression, and when she was gone, saw herself in her true light, weak, selfish, and dishonest.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHAT were Ruth's feelings during the course of that busy day? It is a question difficult to answer. Ruth could not have answered it herself. But they know, who, like her, having sunk in their own esteem by the commission of an undetected fault, are too proud to own their offence, but too conscientious to endure still to listen to words of approbation, and who pass through the necessary routine of occupation with a heavy heart,

Digitized by Google

a dull, abstracted look, a weary spirit of indifference, whilst hiding in their own breasts the bitter sense of shame.

Ruth was pitied for her headache when it was known that she had one; her lessons were excused; she was allowed to stay by herself in the drawing-room, and read. Delicacies were provided for her; Mrs Carter came to sit with her, and talk to her; Miss Barnard took trouble to make her comfortable. Madeline looked really anxious; and Ruth grew more and more wretched; her only satisfaction being the miserable one of knowing that Mary Vernon, who was gone to spend a few days with a friend, was not at hand to remark upon and inquire into her unhappiness. The first idea of discovering Clara's fault, Ruth had entirely given up. She could not do it. Clara must follow her own plans; she must corrupt the minds of others; she must disobey Mrs Carter; Ruth must know it and be silent—and why? Because Ruth was too sincere to accuse another of a fault in which she had in a measure participated; and yet could not own herself wrong, and risk Mrs Carter's displeasure, and the loss of her position in the school. There was but one thing now to be done: to restore the book to its hiding-place, and say nothing. Ruth heartily wished that she had done so at once. By giving way to the impulse of fear, she had increased her own perplexities tenfold. Whilst the book remained in Janet Harding's drawer, there was no safety for any one; yet how to restore it was a great difficulty. She was sure that Clara had missed it; but a few words overheard in the course of the day made her aware that it was supposed to have been possibly mislaid. She must therefore take advantage of the first opportunity to replace it. And there were several opportunities Ruth thought. Several times she tried to find an excuse for going up-stairs to fetch something, but each time Mrs Carter chose to send some one else; not wishing, as she said, that Ruth should trouble herself when her head was so bad. The day passed over, evening came, Ruth found herself alone in the drawing-room, in the twilight. She did not like to be alone, especially when it was growing dusk. It made her nervous to watch the gradual fading of the light; to find the objects about her growing indistinct; to have less and less to distract her thoughts. That is one blessing of night when we choose to make use of it. It shuts out the objects which disturb us by day. It brings before us the reality of God's presence; the awfulness of His purity and holiness. It

Digitized by Google

is as when we look into the purple sky, and see the pale stars shining from afar, and the moon traversing the infinity of space. There they were when the sun shone brightly, when the glare of the day wearied us, when we walked through crowded streets, and transacted the business of life with our fellow-men. There they were, pure and unchangeable, passing on their wondrous way, but we saw them not. And there also was He who made them; present in the cheerful home, in the noisy town, in the crowded shop. We saw not the calm moon, we did not look for the glittering star, and neither did we think of the God who was watching over us, whose Eye was upon our secret thoughts. Now, darkness has fallen upon the earth, and heaven is open before us; and with the sight of heaven, shall not the remembrance likewise return of Him who is its Maker and its Lord?

Ruth trembled in the twilight. But let us not be mistaken; it is dangerous to think lightly of any fault, but it is also dangerous to magnify what we have done wrong beyond what it really deserves. Ruth's fault, as has been said before, would have been of a less serious nature if she had only possessed the courage to confess it. It was her pride which was the great evil. When Ruth thought of what she had done with the idea of acknowledging it, her heart for an instant grew light. She knew that Mrs Carter would be vexed, but she knew also that she would forgive. It was only when she dwelt upon the consequences of her confession; the probability, the almost certainty, that it would cause Mrs Carter to doubt her steadiness of principle, and lower her in the opinion of her companions, and interfere with her being chosen judge, that she really became perplexed how to act. Now she sat in the twilight thinking; very unhappy, very unwell; her head throbbing violently, longing for bed-time, yet afraid that if she did go to bed she should not be able to sleep. Below, there were the usual school sounds: laughter, voices, a piano, and a harp. Ruth almost resolved to go down; anything was better than staying alone. She wondered Madeline did not come to her, she thought it unkind. Presently there was a sudden lull; the music stopped in the middle of a bar; there was a rush as if all were collecting together to hear something; then a single voice spoke, and immediately afterwards Madeline ran up the staircase. She burst eagerly into the room, but checked herself, and said, in a gentle tone—

Digitized by Google

'Ruth, dear, I forgot; I hope I did not disturb you.'

'No, not at all, thank you,' replied Ruth, 'I have been expecting you some time; why did you not come before?'

'Because—indeed, I did not forget you, Ruth; I wanted to come to you very much; but I fancied it would be better to wait till it was all settled, because you would like to hear.'

'Settled! what?' inquired Ruth.

'Oh! I must tell you all from the beginning; but you won't be in a hurry, will you? We were talking down-stairs about Anna, and Mary, and who should be judge, and a great many of them said you; only Clara set her face against it.' Ruth grasped the arm of her chair with an energy of feeling which she could not control.

'Clara objected,' continued Madeline, 'and so did some of the others; and Harriet Trevelyan was proposed, and then we all laughed; and one or two others were mentioned, and some one said it would be pleasant to have a regular choosing day, and a box with votes, and to settle before we went home, because if any new girls came next half-year, they would not enter into it; and we thought it would be nice to have Mary Vernon here, and, in short, to do it all regularly and properly; and at last we settled it delightfully, and they sent me to the study to ask Mrs Carter about it; and she called Miss Barnard, and they talked together, and at last they sent for me again, and told me we might, and I ran into the parlour just to let them know, and then I came up-stairs to you. O Ruth, won't it be charming?'

'Yes, very,' replied Ruth, in a faint voice.

'Ah! you don't care for it to-night; your poor head is bad; but you will to-morrow; and it concerns you more than any one; of course you will be chosen.'

'Not of course, if Clara has her way,' said Ruth, in a bitter tone.

'Oh! that is all nonsense,' answered Madeline; 'Clara can do nothing against you; you are such a favourite. And Mrs Carter thinks you will be judge, I am sure, because she smiled so, and said to Miss Barnard that I seemed particularly interested in the matter.'

Ruth could not bring herself to answer, but Madeline's head being full of the subject, she was contented to run on by herself, describing what they meant to do, and how they were to arrange the school-room, and how each one was to write the

Digitized by Google

name of the party she preferred upon a card; and how when the election was over, they were to enjoy themselves by having a holiday, and, if it was fine, a fête in the garden.

Ruth said 'yes,' and 'no,' and 'very pleasant,' at intervals, and with this Madeline was satisfied.

The subject of the brooch and the secret connected with it was not once alluded to; Ruth remembered it, but dared not approach a topic which she felt convinced was connected with the hidden book, and Madeline's conscience being clear, she had soon ceased to dwell upon it.

The sisters remained talking together till it was quite dark, and Ruth expressed a wish to go to bed. Madeline went to ask Mrs Carter's permission, but Mrs Carter was busy, and she was detained some time before she could speak with her; and just as she had given Ruth's request to Miss Barnard instead, the bell rang for prayers, and Miss Barnard settled the question by saying that Ruth had better come down to prayers, and go to bed with the rest. This was but a trifling circumstance, yet it was very important to Ruth. It prevented her from replacing the book, and caused her an additional anxiety. Mrs Carter kissed her very affectionately when she went to wish her good night; and said she should come and see her after she was in bed. She trusted the headache would be better to-morrow, for every one was grieved when Ruth was ill; she was so kind and useful.

Ruth longed—yes, she longed intensely, to unburthen her heart; to rid herself of the oppressive weight of her secret and her fault. But the acknowledgment—that was the stumbling-block, and Ruth went to her room silent, and very sad.

'Alice,' said Madeline, the next morning, just before breakfast, 'do you know Mrs Carter means to look at the account-books to-day?'

Alice's face grew a little pale. 'Does she? She will not find mine right; I never try to keep them so.'

'Mine would be right, if it were not for that eighteenpence. I cannot imagine what is become of it. I never knew anything so strange.'

Alice could not find a word to reply; she waited an instant, and then inquired how Ruth's head was. She had a vague idea still of talking to Ruth, of acknowledging everything to her. If Ruth had been one degree less perfect in her eyes, she might have done so before, but she feared her look of utter astonishment at such naughtiness.

Digitized by Google

Madeline replied that Ruth's head was better, but she did not look at all well, and Mrs Carter and Miss Barnard both had remarked it. Madeline hoped that Ruth would be quite well soon. It would destroy all the pleasure of choosing the judge if she were not, and some one had said that most probably the day would be fixed almost directly. Alice expressed neither pleasure, nor hope, nor fear. How cold and dull it makes us to do wrong—to have any evil to conceal! There were several subjects of interest mentioned at the breakfast table; the choice of a judge, the different prizes, the holidays, the various journeys. Ruth took no part in the conversation; she was meditating in what way to find an excuse for going again to her room. Clara took no part in it; she was wondering and fearing what could have been done with the lost volume. Alice took no part in it; she was humbled and conscience-stricken at the sense of her own meanness. 'There will just be time for me to look at the account-books, before Monsieur Le Vergnier comes,' said Mrs Carter, as she rose from the breakfast table. 'I should wish those who have tried to keep them correctly, to bring them to my study.' This order was of no consequence to many. It was an affair of choice whether accounts should be kept or not. Madeline took her book reluctantly from her desk. It was neatly written, correctly added up. It was the first occasion on which she had, upon the whole, tried to do her best in being regular and careful: but the unfortunate eighteenpence made all wrong. She lamented it again and again; first to Ruth, then to Janet Harding, then again to Alice, and every word was sharp and piercing to Alice's conscience, until the effort at hiding her feelings became almost more than she could bear.

Madeline went to the study, with a face which was a clear sign of her emotion. She knocked, but received no answer—and knocked again. Still there was no reply; and she waited, leaning against the wall, and not knowing whether it would be right to open the door and go in. There was a ring at the bell, which she knew to be Monsieur Le Vergnier's, and from the sounds she guessed that some one was with him. Immediately afterwards, Clara Manners ran out from the school-room, and passing the study door, went into the entrance hall. Madeline heard her speak, and knew the voice that answered; it was Justine's. Monsieur Le Vergnier went into the school-room. Justine and Clara remained talking together. Madeline thought it would be better to go away, but at that instant, Mrs Carter appeared from another part of the house. She listened, and

Digitized by Google

asked who was in the hall. Madeline told, and Mrs Carter, desiring her to wait in the study, went on. Madeline remained as she was directed, though rather impatient, for she wanted to go back to her lessons. It seemed strange that Mrs Carter should stay so long. The study door was open, and presently, to her surprise, Clara came into the passage alone. Her face was clouded with anger and pride. Her eye caught Madeline's, and she said, in an under-tone: 'You have your will now; it is all over with us.'

'What! how, Clara?' exclaimed Madeline.

Clara caught away the corner of her dress which Madeline held, and, instead of going into the school-room, rushed up the stairs to her room, closing the door with a sharp, echoing sound.

Madeline was frightened. Clara's words were an enigma; but Clara's face was quite pale. Something wrong had been discovered; there was no doubt of that. For some minutes longer Madeline waited in vain; and then being summoned to Monsieur Le Vergnier, she left her account-book open on the study table and went away.

Clara Manners was asked for many times as the French lesson began. It was proposed to send for her, but a message from Miss Barnard stopped all questions, though it did not stop curiosity. 'Miss Barnard's compliments to Monsieur Le Vergnier, Miss Manners would not be able to take her lesson that morning.' Ruth's cheek became of a bright crimson when she heard this, but the colour was soon gone, and she continued her lessons as before.

'Justine! où est Justine? ma fille?' asked Monsieur Le Vergnier, in the course of the lesson.

The question created some surprise. 'What! was Justine come?' No one had seen her. 'It was not usual for her to come without being invited in school hours.'

'But this morning,' Monsieur Le Vergnier said, 'she told him that she had particular business; however, it did not signify, she must be gone home; it did not signify;' and he shrugged his shoulders, and went on teaching.

Madeline was the only one who doubted whether it did not signify. Miss Barnard sat in the school-room keeping strict order and silence, and looked very severe. Monsieur Le Vergnier's politeness was thrown away upon her; she paid him the necessary civilities, and nothing more, and when he

Digitized by Google

rose to depart, her bow was colder, more unbending than ever.

'Miss Madeline Clifford is wanted in the study,' said Dawson, coming to the school-room door.

Madeline rose instantly. Alice whispered, 'What is the matter?' but Madeline put her finger to her lips, and hastened to obey. Once more she stood before the study and knocked, and there was a quiet cold answer, 'Come in.'

Mrs Carter was alone, sitting in her usual position in the arm-chair by the side of the table. Her finger rested upon Madeline's account-book; another book, shabby and dirty, lay near. On a chair, in one corner, was Justine Le Vergnier's bonnet.

'Madeline,' said Mrs Carter, fixing her mild but searching eye upon her, 'this is your book, I believe.'

'Yes, ma'am, my account-book. I left it here this morning.'

'I have been looking at it; it is not right.'

'No, ma'am,' replied Madeline, boldly. 'It is wrong by eighteenpence. I cannot tell how.'

'You cannot tell? But you must have some idea. You have kept all the rest so carefully, you must have some notion what you have done with it.'

'No;' Madeline had none whatever; and, whilst owning this, she blushed deeply.

Mrs Carter repeated, still looking at her steadily, 'You are quite sure you have not lent it? quite certain?'

Madeline could not be certain. Mrs Carter's manner, without her intending it, confused and distressed her.

Mrs Carter considered a little, and then said more kindly, though still with something of restraint, 'Very well, my dear; you may go.'

Madeline departed, much more uncomfortable than she came. She went back to the school-room; the usual lessons were going on—reading, geography, practising. Madeline took her share in each, yet still her thoughts wandered. What could that strange, short interview mean? Where was Clara? Why was Justine's bonnet in the study? How provoking it was that she could not talk to Ruth! Madeline looked anxiously at Ruth as she thought this. There had been something in her sister's face all the morning which perplexed her. It was a look of suffering; yet Ruth had said that she was nearly well. One 'clock—lessons were over—silence ceased; and talking—such lking began. So fast! so eager! so confused! Each one

Digitized by Google

bent upon speaking for herself. Madeline sat down by Ruth, and passed her hand affectionately over her forehead, and kissed her, and called her her own dear Ruth, and wished she was quite well; it was wretched to see her so changed. The faint smile which played upon Ruth's features made her real feelings only the more visible.

'May I talk a little to you, Ruth?' continued Madeline, 'I want to tell you about some things very much.'

Ruth gave a quiet assent, and resting her forehead upon her hand, listened whilst Madeline related what had passed during the morning. When she came to Clara's words, 'It is all over with us now,' Ruth started, and Madeline stopped, and asked if she was in pain. But Ruth's calm reply was, 'No, thank you; go on.' And Madeline went on.

'Can you guess? can you think, Ruth, what is the matter?' she said, as she concluded.

Ruth shook her head; she could not utter a falsehood.

'It was the same book, I am nearly certain,' continued Madeline, 'which I saw upon the study table, that Florence Trevelyan said belonged to her, on that day when Justine gave me the brooch. I meant to have told you all about that, only we have been thinking of other things. By the by, where is Florence?'

Missing;—Harriet was missing also; both had been sent for during the morning lessons. Their absence was generally remarked, every one was whispering and looking, for it was becoming evident that a secret there was somewhere.

'Dinner will be ready in a minute,' said Madeline, finding that Ruth was little inclined for conversation. 'Won't you come into the dressing-room, and get ready?'

Ruth had no appetite for dinner: she would much rather have remained where she was; but she dreaded to attract notice, and went with Madeline, and tried to join in the general observations, and to be as little unlike herself as possible. Still it was remarked how ill and pale Ruth looked, and some feared that if she were not better all the pleasure of the election day would be over. Pleasure was spoken of, but there was not much cheerfulness in the tone of the party, the idea of a secret weighing upon all—upon one especially besides Ruth. Alice knew quite well what was going on. She felt herself less guilty than the others; she had not given way entirely to temptation; and she hoped that whatever might be found out she might obtain forgiveness; but her mean, dishonourable conduct to Madeline

Digitized by Google

was not to be forgotten. Once or twice she thought she must tell her, even though it might be the means of bringing herself into disgrace as a partaker in the fault of the others. This was especially the case when she heard Madeline mention the account-book, and again express her sorrow and surprise at the mistake or loss, about which she said Mrs Carter appeared very much annoyed. Alice felt then, that although she might repay the money, she was still dishonest.

The dinner passed very silently. Clara, Florence, and Harriet were absent. Only one thing of importance happened. Some one mentioned the next day but one as desirable for the election of the judge, because Fanny Wilson was going home the day after, and would be vexed to miss it. Mrs Carter became very grave, and did not instantly reply; but after a pause she said, 'They might choose their own day—it might be the one named if they wished it.' But this cold consent was not at all what was desired. Generally speaking, Mrs Carter took a great interest in all their pleasures; now it seemed an effort to her to attend to anything. Grace was said; the cloth removed; the servants had left the room; and the benches being pushed back, a general move followed for all to return to the school-room. Mrs Carter spoke. 'Stay, my dears, all of you,' and every voice was hushed, every movement stopped. 'I wish to speak to you all; I have something particular to say.' Mrs Carter's words came one by one, as if dragged from her; and those who ventured to look in her face, saw that its expression was unusual. A pause, so long as to alarm even the most innocent and indifferent, succeeded. Madeline stood by Ruth, and noticed that she caught the arm of a chair near, and grasped it firmly, whilst Alice twisted a silk chain which hung round her neck, till it was thoroughly entangled. Madeline's own heart beat quickly, but she looked up without shrinking; for what had she to conceal?

Mrs Carter continued: 'Some of you, I hope many, are doubtless quite unprepared for what I am going to say. There are others, I fear, whose consciences will at once accuse them. Before I proceed further, I wish all to understand that to confess a fault freely is the surest road to forgiveness.'

Stillness! so that a pin might have been heard to fall; yet in the stillness Madeline heard Ruth's quick, irregular breathing.

Mrs Carter waited for an answer in vain, and again she spoke rapidly—for her—firmly, almost abruptly. 'One of my

Digitized by Google

strictest rules—one about which I am most anxious, has been broken. Books have been introduced into the house without my knowledge. This one'—and the volume of the novel which Madeline had seen in the study was laid upon the table—'this book, which it is a disgrace for any lady to look into, was found this morning in the hands of Mademoiselle Le Vergnier. I say nothing with regard to her conduct; her foreign education must be her excuse. Those who have joined with her can plead no such excuse.' Mrs Carter's eye passed slowly from one to the other. It rested anxiously upon Madeline, doubtfully upon Alice, and to Ruth she said, kindly, 'Sit down, my dear; you look as if your head ached terribly.'

'I might,' continued Mrs Carter, 'question you all separately as to your knowledge of this business. I might in that way more certainly discover the truth; but I would rather be open with you, as I trust you will be with me. I mean to tell you all that I know, and then, I hope I am not mistaken in believing that even those who have done wrong will be too honourable to conceal it. This morning, as I before said, I found this book accidentally—I ought rather to say providentially—in the hands of Mademoiselle Le Vergnier. It was brought for Clara Manners and Harriet and Florence Trevelyan.' This announcement created no surprise; but Alice marvelled how her name should have escaped. 'So far,' pursued Mrs Carter, 'there is no doubt; the parties have themselves confessed their fault. How painful it was to me to hear their confession, to feel that I could no longer place confidence in them, I will not attempt to describe. At first I believed that the evil ended with them, but I was mistaken; there are two others, who have been named as having a knowledge, at least, that the practice of reading books by stealth was carried on in the school. Alice, I appeal to you—and Madeline.' Madeline's colour rose in a sudden glow of indignation. In an instant she had stepped forward from the circle, and was standing alone before Mrs Carter. Alice looked around her hurriedly, and her limbs shook, and her lips moved, but she did not utter a word. 'Before I hear what you have to say,' added Mrs Carter, 'I would remind you, and not you only, but all, that in a case like the present, any confession which is not strictly true is an injury to others as well as to yourselves. If you are not thoroughly sincere, it is almost impossible but that some one should be accused unjustly. I know you would be shocked at the idea of

Digitized by Google

accusing any one falsely by words. I earnestly pray that you may not be induced to do so by silence. Now, Alice, let me hear what you can tell me.' A general hush of expectation followed this command. Every glance was directed to Alice; even Madeline turned round, forgetful of her own painful position, in her anxiety to discover how far Alice was involved in Clara's offence.

And what could Alice say? what did she say? She began plainly, simply, acknowledging that she had joined with Clara by reading a part of one book, on one occasion, and that on a Sunday afternoon; but denying any further participation in the fault. 'Clara,' she said, 'had requested her to join, but believing that it was against Mrs Carter's wishes, she had constantly declined.' So far all was strictly true, and Mrs Carter's face grew more cheerful, and twice she smiled a smile of approbation, as Alice repeated that she knew she had done wrong at first, but she was sorry for it, and had tried very much to avoid following Clara's example. If Alice could have told the same tale of struggle against temptation even to the end, she need have little feared the loss of her prize; but here she paused. Mrs Carter looked at her, evidently expecting something more. 'Is that the whole?' she said. Alice would have given all she was worth to know the meaning of the question; to understand how much Mrs Carter knew. She did not say it was; but she muttered something unintelligible, which was understood to mean so.

'Thank you, Alice, for what you have told me,' continued Mrs Carter. 'As far as it goes it agrees with what I had previously learned. Now, Madeline, I trust that you will be equally candid.'

Madeline's eyes were raised in mingled confusion and astonishment. 'Candid! what could she be candid about?' She recollected: it must be the promise. Yes, there was nothing else—there could not be. In a very eager tone, without the smallest hesitation, she broke at once into the subject. 'She did not know anything about reading wrong books; she had never heard of any one's doing so; but one day she found a book like that,' pointing to the novel, 'amongst Florence Trevelyan's, and she thought it was Mrs Carter's; but Florence and Justine said they knew about it, and begged her not to tell; and Justine thought she had promised, but she had not; and she did not think much more about it, for she had never heard anything more after that one occasion.'

Digitized by Google

'And Justine gave you a brooch, Madeline,' said Mrs Carter, sternly; 'It was upon condition that you should not tell—it was a bribe.'

Madeline's start of disgust spoke more plainly for her sincerity than any words. She turned to her companions, 'Who had accused her? Who had spoken so falsely?'

Mrs Carter checked her impetuosity. She said quietly, 'It was Florence Trevelyan who told me you had received it. She mentioned it as a mark of your intimacy with Justine, and a sign that you were a participator in the secret.'

Madeline gave a quick, bright glance of conscious innocence at Ruth, and with a voice which she vainly tried to keep subdued, answered, 'Justine did give me a brooch. I did not know it was a bribe. I thought she was fond of me; but I could not promise what she wished, and I gave it back. Ruth knows that I did, and Justine has it now;' and Madeline looked earnestly at Mrs Carter, watching the effect of her explanation.

Truth, it is said, is all-powerful. There was truth in every tone of Madeline's voice, in every gesture, even in the sparkle of her clear, intelligent eye. Yet Mrs Carter's brow relaxed but little of its severity. She turned again to Alice. 'This sounds well,' she said, 'but there is something beyond; I have not heard all from both of you. There was a subscription for the books; Clara, Harriet, and Florence subscribed, and some one else. I have examined those concerned separately, and have received different accounts. Clara says it was Alice who gave the money. Justine states that she received it, but she did not exactly understand from whom it came. Florence tells me that the money was Madeline's. Madeline, bring me your account-book.'

Madeline stood as if thunderstruck.

'Bring me your account-book,' repeated Mrs Carter.

Madeline, as she moved away, caught Ruth's eye, and read in it that she doubted her. Alas! for that heart which has learned to suspect evil in another, because it is conscious of it in itself.

When Madeline returned, her eyes were filled with tears; she laid the book before Mrs Carter in silence. It was opened at the last page.

Mrs Carter pointed to the figures, and said, 'Madeline, the account is wrong by eighteenpence; eighteenpence was the amount of the subscription to the library.'

Digitized by Google

Madeline drew herself up proudly. 'She did not know it; she had never heard that there was a subscription.'

'Eighteenpence was the share paid either by you or by Alice,' continued Mrs Carter. 'Let me advise you to think once more; have you no recollection, no idea, what has become of this money?'

'None whatever.' Madeline's voice grew firmer.

Ruth leant forward and caught her hand. Her face was deadly pale, and in a faint whisper she said, 'Madeline, dearest, pray tell.'

Madeline's hand was withdrawn impatiently. 'Ruth, you are wrong,' she exclaimed, 'I have nothing to say. I would own to twenty times the fault if I had done it.'

Ruth sunk back in her chair, and put her hand to her forehead.

Mrs Carter placed a smelling-bottle by her side, and said very affectionately, 'My love, you may go if you wish it: this only distresses you; but we will hope Madeline is right.'

Ruth did not take advantage of the permission.

Mrs Carter sat for some instants deep in thought; whilst a low murmur passed round the circle. Suddenly she rose, and once more addressing them all, said, 'There is in the house another volume of this book; if any one present has any knowledge where it is to be found, I request, I earnestly request, that I may be told.'

No answer, only wondering looks of astonishment and ignorance.

'Alice,' said Mrs Carter, 'do you know? Madeline, do you? Janet? Fanny?' Mrs Carter was going round regularly.

A faint scream from Madeline stopped her. Ruth's head was drooping powerless; she was fainting. Mrs Carter's natural kindness in an instant returned; she supported Ruth, and bathed her forehead, and spoke fondly to her, and then, with the assistance of Miss Barnard, carried her up-stairs, and laid her upon the sofa in the drawing-room. Miss Barnard remained to watch her, and Mrs Carter returned to the dining-room. The short absence had been a time for busy conversation to all but Madeline and Alice. Madeline's fears for Ruth had absorbed all thoughts of her own situation; quiet tears stole down her cheeks, and every trace of excitement or anger had faded from her face. Alice sat like a statue; the voices around her, the persons, the circumstances in which she

Digitized by Google

was placed, were as nothing to her; her thoughts were busy with memories of the past; before her mind's eye there floated a fair, gentle, shadowy image; a face of beauty, purity, holiness—the face of her mother. And with her mother there came another remembrance, the thought of one whom she honoured, although she feared her; whose happiness in life was bound up in her good conduct. When Lady Catharine Hyde first became the friend of Mrs Lennox, it was at school; the foundation of their affection was laid in the upright honesty of heart which had induced Lady Catharine to acknowledge another's goodness, even though by so doing she condemned herself. Who would love Alice for the same cause?

Mrs Carter returned. The expression of Alice's face was strangely altered; she pressed her lips together, and a bright pink spot burned upon her cheek. One foot was advanced as if she would have spoken, but Mrs Carter gave no heed to her; her words were addressed to all equally. 'I wish you to go to the school-room, and to remain there. Since this mystery cannot be cleared up in any other way, the house will be searched until the book is found.'

A blank look of dismay fell upon all. No one there present had cause to fear the search, but all felt bitterly the change in Mrs Carter's manner. They turned away sorrowfully and silently. Mrs Carter laid her hand upon Madeline's shoulder, and said, 'Wait;' but before she could continue, Alice's voice interrupted her. Those who were leaving the room did not hear what was spoken; even Madeline did not, though she was standing very near; but Mrs Carter bent her head and said—

'Certainly, directly if you will. Madeline, go with the rest. Let no one leave the school-room; my sister will join you there shortly.'

Madeline followed her companions, and Alice was left with Mrs Carter.

For a quarter of an hour Madeline sat alone—bowed down with shame and grief for an offence of which she yet knew herself to be innocent. She was sent for to the dining-room; another ten minutes passed. Then the door slowly opened, and Madeline and Alice came in together. Madeline's arm was thrown round Alice, and she whispered to her, 'Let me manage it; don't vex yourself.' But Alice withdrew herself, and walking into the centre of the room, stood at the top of the

Digitized by Google

long table. Madeline sat down to her desk as before. Alice's chain was twisted and untwisted; she coughed, looked round her, took up a book, sat down for a moment, got up again, and at last exclaimed: 'Mrs Carter knows about the subscription now; it is all right, and Maddy had nothing to do with it; and so you need not trouble yourselves, or ask any questions. Maddy was right; that's all;' and then poor Alice, her face of a burning crimson, and her eyes full of tears, rushed out of the room, and waited for several minutes in the passage to endeavour to recover her composure.

The true meaning of this speech was not to be gained from Madeline. Her companions crowded around her, and questioned her, but Madeline only looked distressed, and said it did not concern any one but herself; only Alice was very good-natured, and she loved her dearly. She would be very much obliged if they would leave her alone, and not make quite such a noise, because Ruth was lying down in the back drawing-room, and it would disturb her.

But Madeline could keep nothing from Ruth, neither did Alice wish it. Now that the confession had been made to those whom it principally concerned, Alice was too much troubled to desire approbation which she did not deserve—especially Ruth's. She could not, indeed, be at ease, until certain that Ruth was made acquainted with her fault, and she would have been willing that Madeline should speak to her at once; but no one could venture to go up-stairs, though Madeline longed to know whether Ruth was better.

'There will be no walking beyond the garden this evening,' said Miss Barnard, as the clock struck five. 'I am going there myself; I shall expect to see you all out in a quarter of an hour. Remember no one goes up-stairs.'

Madeline ventured to ask if she might sit with Ruth. Miss Barnard was not sure; she would speak with Mrs Carter first. Presently a message was sent by Dawson, saying, that the Miss Cliffords might be together, but no one else was on any account to go even into the dressing-room. Dawson would fetch the bonnets and shawls.

Alice stopped Madeline as she was hastening out of the room. She tried to speak to her, but the words would not readily come; there were tears instead. 'You are going to Ruth,' she said, at length.

'Yes, but Alice, dear, never mind. Ruth will understand, and she will thank you so much for being good-natured.'

Digitized by Google

Alice shrunk from the thought of gratitude. 'If she does not hate me, that is all I can expect. And she will want to tell Mary Vernon, and then some one else, and they will all know. Madeline, what will they think of me? I am so miserable, and I can't bear being with them all here; everything is dull and changed. Shan't you be glad when it is found out who has the book?'

'I don't think any one has it,' replied Madeline. 'I don't think any one could hide it all this time. I believe it has fallen down somewhere, or is mislaid.'

'Yes, perhaps so; but what will be done about Clara and Justine? How strange it is without them!'

'You miss Clara more than I do,' said Madeline; 'I did not like her ever.'

'It is not missing exactly, but things are dull, and my heart is heavy, just as if a weight was upon it.'

Madeline was on the point of saying, 'Go, and talk to the others;' but that did not seem quite the advice to be given.

'They are all settling about the election,' said Alice, looking at a party which had gathered round the window to dress for the garden. 'I cannot imagine how they can think of it now; and Ruth ill, too. It will be no good to have the election the day after to-morrow.'

'You forget about Fanny Wilson's going away,' said Madeline; 'and perhaps Ruth will be better, and Mrs Carter will have forgiven Clara by that time.'

'Forgiven! no, that is not likely; I never saw her so much in earnest in being angry with any one. O Maddy, if they would but be quiet! they make me wretched with the noise.'

'Shall I ask them?' said Madeline.

'No, no, not for the world! they would want to know what is the matter. You had better go—never mind me.

'But I cannot leave you crying, dear Alice; shall I come into the garden with you?'

'No; go to Ruth; she ought to have you. I thought I should be happy when I had told; but I am not.'

Madeline grew very thoughtful for a few moments; then she said—

'You know, Alice, what Mrs Carter talked about?'

'Yes; the being wicked. I don't forget it; I know it was very wicked.'

'And about saying prayers,' continued Madeline, with great hesitation.

Digitized by Google

'Yes; but I cannot do that till bed-time; I wish I could.'

'We can say little prayers at any time,' said Madeline, and her colour heightened.

'No, not now, when they are all about.'

'Yes; just to ourselves; a few words we can,' said Madeline.

'Oh, no; I cannot; they will come and interrupt.'

'But if you take a book in your hand, and walk alone, they will not so much. You would like to be alone, Alice?'

'Alone, or with you. I should like to be with you best.'

'But, perhaps, it would be better if you could be quite alone,' persisted Madeline.

'Oh, no! that would not help me. I cannot say prayers out of my own head in that odd sort of way; I should think it wrong.'

'Papa told me one day,' replied Madeline, 'that when I wanted to find out short prayers, I should look for them in the Psalms. If you were to take your Prayer Book out, they would not say anything to you, because they would fancy you were trying to get your Psalm perfect for Sunday.

'But I don't know where to look for the verses,' said Alice.

'Don't you? there are a great many all through the Psalms; and there are some especially which Mrs Carter was talking to us about the other day; what she called the penitential Psalms. Don't you recollect? Little Ellen could not pronounce the word rightly.'

'Yes, I remember,' answered Alice: 'but I could not say such words as those, you know, Maddy, because they would not be true for me. I am very sorry—very sorry indeed; but I don't think I am as sorry as those Psalms.'

'The day papa talked to Ruth and me about the Psalms,' continued Madeline, 'he said that they were meant to show people what they ought to feel.'

'But I don't feel,' interrupted Alice.

'Papa said we could not use them all, only parts,' continued Madeline; 'but he thought when we had done anything very wrong, if we were to read some of them over—not all the penitential Psalms, but others too—they would make us think more how dreadful it was to do wrong; and then we might choose out the verses we could say, and make little prayers of them. He mentioned three particularly. Don't you think, Alice, if you were to tell them all that you want to read, and were to go away by yourself, you could just try?'

Digitized by Google

'I don't know; they would come and ask me what I was doing,' replied Alice.

'But I should say, I wished to be quiet and read.'

'Then they will come and peep, and call out loud that it is a Prayer Book.'

'Perhaps they will; I should not like that myself; but, Alice, it won't hurt you if they do; and I daresay they will let you alone if you really ask them. I think I should begin.'

'Begin what?' asked Alice.

'Those three papa named. I will give you the list—the 25th, and the 130th, and the 143d.'

'And read them through?' said Alice.

'Yes, all through; and afterwards pick out the verses, and just say them over again like prayers. Perhaps, Alice, you would not have such a heavy heart then.'

Alice gave a deep sigh.

'I think I should like it,' she said. 'I should like to do something grave; I cannot laugh now. But how shall I manage if they make fun of me?'

'Tell them you are reading because you like it, and walk up and down, and don't talk to them, and then, perhaps, they will leave off. But, Alice, you need not be so much afraid now, because Clara is not here, and Miss Barnard will be in the garden.'

'Miss Barnard! I forgot!' exclaimed Alice. 'She will scold if we are not out. Maddy, give me your Prayer Book and the list.'

'It is written on the first leaf,' replied Madeline. 'I marked the Psalms down in pencil the very day papa talked about them.'

Alice seized the Prayer Book, hid it under a lesson book, and carried both with her into the garden; and before Madeline went up-stairs to her sister, she watched her from the window pacing the side walk alone. Madeline called to Janet Harding, who was passing at the moment, and said—

'I have a favour to ask of you, Janet. Will you try and not let Alice be teased? She says she wants to read by herself, and she is afraid you will all interrupt her; but you will keep the rest away if you can, won't you?'

Janet promised willingly; she was always ready to please Madeline.

'But you won't say anything about it, or tell them that I have spoken to you,' continued Madeline.

Digitized by Google

Janet again promised, though she looked at Alice with some surprise and curiosity. Madeline nodded to Alice as she caught her eye when she came along the walk, and then, secure in having provided one champion at least for Alice in case of annoyance, ran up-stairs to Ruth.

For a whole hour Madeline and Ruth were together in the drawing-room, Ruth lying on the sofa, Madeline sitting on a little stool by her side. Ruth said she was not better, and she did not look better. Her complexion was still pale, though her cheek was flushed, and there were dark shadows under the eyes. Madeline thought her ill; but there was something strange in the illness; something which had altered Ruth very much. Ruth was rather subject to headache, especially when she was anxious or excited. This seemed like a common headache; at least, Ruth did not complain more than usual. Still she was different; or was it that everything was different? that the mystery in the house made even Ruth mysterious? It might be so; but from whatever cause, Madeline felt a restraint with her sister during that hour's conversation, which was new and painful to her.

They talked almost entirely upon one subject—that is, Madeline talked; Ruth only said, 'Yes,' and 'No,' and sometimes turned away with a look of weariness. Madeline was full of the events of the morning, and the conduct of Alice. 'I love Alice now,' she said, 'more, a great deal more than ever. I dare-say she did not mean any harm about the money; she would have repaid it in the holidays.'

'Yes, perhaps so;' and Ruth said no more.

'Dear Ruth! I am tiring you; but I want so much to know what you think about it; whether you don't call Alice very good-natured for not letting me be blamed; and whether you are not sure that Lady Catharine would be very pleased if she knew it.'

'I don't know, perhaps so, she might.'

'Might, Ruth! but I am certain of it. You know if she had not spoken, I should have been in a dreadful scrape. Mrs Carter said she was afraid for me; and she was so kind to Alice afterwards, and forgave her quite, and told her what to do to take care another time, only she said one dreadful thing; that letting another person be accused unjustly and being silent, was really bearing false witness against our neighbour; and she said that was what Alice had done, and then she spoke so very seriously. But I cannot understand that Alice really was as bad as that:

Digitized by Google

being silent does not seem like speaking; only Mrs Carter declares it is. What do you think?' No answer. 'And, Ruth,' added Madeline, 'what will Mary Vernon say when she comes back?'

Yes, what would Mary Vernon say? Ruth had many times in the day thought of that; Mary Vernon was to return late that evening. How much she would have to hear!

'Have they searched all the house?' Ruth managed to say in one of Madeline's pauses, speaking in a faint voice.

'I don't know, but I think Dawson was going into the school-room. I am sure the book must have slipped down. No one would let such a fuss be made who knew where it was.' Ruth lay motionless—even her breathing seemed for the instant stopped; she turned her head from side to side as if in great pain.

'Janet Harding thinks that Clara will be sent away,' continued Madeline. 'She says that a sister of hers—one of Janet's sisters, I mean—was at a school where something of the kind happened, and one of the girls was sent away directly. Clara is alone in Mrs Carter's dressing-room, and Harriet and Florence are in her bedroom; and I don't know where Justine is. Jessie thinks that Dawson was told to carry up some dinner to her, but I think she must be gone home. Oh, dear! how I wish the book was found.'

'Madeline,' said Ruth, 'some one is calling you.'

Madeline listened, 'I cannot hear any one; but there is talking;—hark! yes, Mrs Carter is asking for me;' and Madeline instantly ran down-stairs.

Ruth trembled like an aspen leaf. That summons might denote a discovery. Then there was no further prospect of delay. Confession or sin lay before her. But had she not sinned already? was it nothing to have disregarded her mother's wishes; to have concealed her fault; to have determined upon allowing others to go on in an evil course unchecked; to have caused pain and suspicion to Mrs Carter, and annoyance, to speak in the lightest terms, to a whole household? Was it nothing to have acted a lie; to have pretended ignorance by silence, though she would not have dared to say it in words? All these things had Ruth done; to this extent had she sinned, and because of these sins, because she could not humble herself to own them, she now stood upon the brink of one sin more.

Madeline spoke to Mrs Carter, and went into the school-room.

Digitized by Google

Ruth heard nothing more for several minutes. A door opened, she caught a sound of sobs! It closed again. Ruth rose and walked to the head of the stairs. The voices she heard were in Mrs Carter's study. In the school-room there seemed a general lull. Presently Dawson came up the stairs—she passed quickly, so that there was no time to ask what was going on, even if Ruth had found courage to do so. It seemed better to go back to the drawing-room, yet Ruth still stood near the door, which was ajar. Footsteps came slowly down the staircase. Harriet Trevelyan was first, then Florence, Clara, and Justine Le Vergnier. Ruth had one glimpse of their features as they went by, and could see the change in all. Even Clara Manners for once seemed subdued. 'Dawson,' said Ruth, catching hold of the servant's dress as she approached her, 'wait one minute, I want to know. Have they—have they found the book?'

'Why! Miss Clifford, how you frightened me! I did not know any one was there. Yes, it is found.'

'Where?' was upon Ruth's lips, but she could not bring herself to put the question.

Dawson looked at her with compassion. 'Your head must be very bad, Miss Clifford; you look so deadly pale: can't I fetch you something?'

'No, thank you, Dawson; I am better. What does Mrs Carter want with them all?'

'Indeed, Miss Clifford, I can't tell much about it. The book was found in Miss Harding's bottom drawer, where she keeps her cloaks. We missed it once, and my mistress made us go through the drawers again. But I must not stop; are you sure I can't get anything for you?'

One thing there was which Ruth wanted;—one thing—but no earthly power could give it her. It was a humble spirit. She turned away from Dawson, and went back to the sofa to cry bitterly and think.

This was Ruth's last moment for repentance and action. She felt that it was so, and her heart was softened. A sudden impulse of wretchedness induced her once more to go to the head of the stairs; but the action was not the result of firm resolution; it was an effort made without prayer, trusting in her own strength, and it failed. The parlour door opened for an instant, and Ruth, in an agony of causeless alarm, rushed back to her former position, to await whatever might occur.

The weariness, the bitterness, the sad sinking of the heart,

Digitized by Google

the shame of that next hour may not well be described. There are those who have felt it, who have sunk under a similar temptation, and suffered a like trial. For them there needs no description. There are others who as yet are ignorant of it. May God grant them such a portion of His grace, such an assistance from the Spirit of Truth and Holiness, that they may never learn its misery by experience!

When an hour had gone by, Madeline re-appeared, and with her came Mrs Carter. The brightness of the afternoon had passed away; a shadow seemed stealing over all things; the room looked cheerless; the sounds of bustle and amusement which usually filled the house had ceased. Mrs Carter's steady tread, her anxious, restrained expression of countenance, Madeline's first eager glance, and immediately afterwards her downcast look, and the tears which stood in her eyes, frightened Ruth. Mrs Carter walked up to the sofa, and sat down by Ruth, without speaking. Madeline stood.

'Sit down, my dear,' said Mrs Carter, in a tone which few would have discovered to be full of agitation. She took Ruth's cold hand, and felt her pulse; it was rapid and weak, and Mrs Carter stooped to kiss her forehead, and pity her. Then she said: 'Ruth, we are in sad perplexity; have you heard?'

'No one has been here since Madeline went away,' replied Ruth, evading the answer.

'We have found the missing book,' continued Mrs Carter. 'Where, you will scarcely imagine: in Janet's drawer.'

Ruth's heart throbbed till she was faint, yet she summoned strength to ask: 'Who found it?'

'Dawson found it,' replied Mrs Carter. 'She had searched the drawer before, but overlooked it.'

Mrs Carter paused, and Ruth's eyes closed for an instant, for she dared not look upon the friend she was deceiving.

'Still, I am not satisfied,' continued Mrs Carter; 'Janet denies all knowledge of the book; she could not tell even its title; her look and manner were those of perfect innocence; I can scarcely distrust her. Yet who else could have put it there?'

'Dawson says it might have come there by accident,' Madeline ventured to observe; 'she does not think Janet would tell a story.'

'Neither do I, Madeline,' replied Mrs Carter; 'at least, I am very unwilling to believe it. Janet has many faults, but I do not

Digitized by Google

think she is insincere. It is possible that the book may have been placed there accidentally with the cloak. I need not ask, Ruth, if you can help me to find out the truth. I am certain you would if you could.'

Ruth's answer was scarcely heard.

Mrs Carter looked very anxious, but there was no suspicion in her face; she bent fondly over Ruth, smoothing her forehead, and remarking to Madeline, 'that it would not do to tease her with questions till she was better.'

Ruth could not smile, she could not even feel grateful, but she roused herself and said, 'She was sure that Janet must be innocent.' A long sigh followed, and Ruth turned away her face that the shame of her heart might not be read in it.

Mrs Carter sat for some minutes in thought. Presently, she turned to Ruth and again felt her pulse. The cold hand was now burning. 'We must have advice for you to-morrow, my child, if you are not better.'

Ruth endeavoured to force a smile. She said that she hoped to be quite well to-morrow.

'It is the excitement,' continued Mrs Carter; 'every one has been excited to-day. Poor Janet! I never should have suspected her.'

'Janet always spoke truth to us,' said Madeline. 'Did she not, Ruth?'

Ruth bent her head instead of replying.

'We shall see,' replied Mrs Carter. 'I am not decided that she is guilty. I cannot feel to her as I do to the others concerned in this sad business. My dear children, I am only thankful the disappointment has not been in you.' Mrs Carter once more kissed them both, and left them together.

Ruth watched till the door closed behind Mrs Carter, and then she seized Madeline's hand, and exclaimed: 'Janet will not be punished.'

Madeline looked at her in astonishment. 'She will not be punished unless something more is proved. No one thinks she has anything to do with it.'

'What can they think, then?' asked Ruth, whilst her voice grew husky.

'They think it was an accident; some of the drawers were cleared out the other day, and the cloaks carried into the closet in the back room, where Clara says she always kept the books;

Digitized by Google

and Mrs Carter supposes it may have been taken up by accident when they were replaced. Dawson says so too.'

'And what makes them so sure about Janet?'

'Her manner, a great deal. She did not blush, nor cry, but she looked so very surprised; and Clara and they all protested they had never mentioned the matter to her; and no one had ever seen her look at any strange books down-stairs; she was always sitting in the school-room at her desk; and at night we must have known it, because we were in the same room. I am sure she had nothing to do with it.'

Ruth heaved a sigh of relief, yet a sharp pang of conscience accompanied it.

'One reason why I am sure of Janet,' continued Madeline, 'is, that she is so strict about religion and those things. Clara used to say she was a hypocrite, but I never thought her so; and Alice thinks she is in earnest, though it makes her angry to hear her quote texts.'

'Her papa and mamma seem very particular,' said Ruth, forcing herself to make some remark.

'Yes, and very odd; and I should not like them much,' continued Madeline, 'but still they are good, and Janet is more careful about her prayers and the Bible than almost any one; that is why I never laugh at her. You don't think she took the book, do you, Ruth?'

Ruth started up without answering.

'Where are you going? What is the matter?' asked Madeline, half alarmed.

Ruth stopped, and returned to the sofa. 'My head aches very much,' she said.

'And you want to go to bed? I will ask if you may.'

'Stay one instant,' said Ruth; 'where are Clara and Justine?'

'Justine is gone. Mrs Carter sent her with Dawson, and wrote a note to Monsieur Le Vergnier. She is never to be here again; never, Mrs Carter said twice.'

'And Clara?' asked Ruth.

'She is to sleep alone in Mary Vernon's room to-night. Mrs Carter said something worse of her than of any one. I think she means that her papa shall be sent for, to take her away in disgrace, but I did not quite understand. Mrs Carter was quite kind in comparison to Florence and Harriet; that is, she was very grave and vexed; but she did not say she should punish them much, and they do seem very sorry. I don't think they will ever go on so badly again.'

Digitized by Google

'Mrs Carter is very kind,' said Ruth, in a low, musing tone.

'Oh, yes! so exceedingly kind, so wishing that it should all be happy and right again. If it were only quite settled about Janet, I think it would be.'

'Janet!' repeated Ruth, as if speaking to herself.

'Should you like to see her?' asked Madeline.

Ruth shrank as if a serpent had stung her.

'No, no; I can't—I don't wish it. Madeline, pray don't;' and more calmly Ruth added, 'Mrs Carter is busy now.'

'Rather; but I will ask about your going to bed, and perhaps she will come and wish you good night.'

'I don't want it—my head—if I can only go to bed,' said Ruth.

'Well, you shall, dear. Mrs Carter will be sure to say yes.'

Madeline's light, little step scarcely sounded as she ran downstairs. Ruth heard her cheerful voice when she spoke to some one whom she met at the bottom. She heard her say—

'Janet, dear, don't fret. Mrs Carter tries to believe you, and I do quite. We shall find out by and by.'

Janet's melancholy tone was all that caught Ruth's ear, until a few sentences more had passed between them, but Janet's last words were—

'Give my love to Ruth, and tell her I am very sorry her head is so bad.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE greater number of persons, whether old or young, think but little of their own faults or of the faults of others. They do not see the ends to which their actions are tending; they imagine it certain that all must be right at last, and so they hear of evil and speak of it, perhaps sigh over it, or condemn it, and then go away to their occupations and their pleasures, and forget it. But there are some events which must make an impression upon the minds even of the youngest and most thoughtless. The departure of Clara Manners was of this description; it was full of mystery. No one of Mrs Carter's pupils saw her after she was sent back to her room, when the book was discovered in Janet Harding's drawer. No one knew exactly what was to become of her. Some thought that she was to be sent home

Digitized by Google

directly; others that she was to wait till they all went. Madeline stated her belief that it was Mrs Carter's intention to have her first taken to the house of her aunt, a lady who lived very near London. The conjectures were made early the following morning; they were set at rest before the close of the day.

Mrs Carter was absent from the school-room during the early lessons, and hurried away from the dinner-table, as a carriage drove into the sweep, even before a visitor was announced. Miss Barnard's orders were very strict that no one was to leave the room. And they sat there silent and listening. Conversation went on in the drawing-room above them for some little time; there was an opening and shutting of doors, and a heavy tread on the stairs, as if two persons were carrying down a trunk. At last the drawing-room door was heard to open, and the voices became more distinct. Mrs Carter spoke, and a stranger answered. It was impossible to hear what was said then, but Mrs Carter's words were clearer as they approached the drawing-room door. She addressed Clara by name, and bade her good-bye; but the tone—how different it was from the expression of fond maternal kindness which usually called them all 'dear children!' Whether Clara's proud feelings were touched none could tell; but she must have hurried in shame to the carriage, for it seemed but an instant before its wheels rolled over the sweep, and, like a prisoner carried away to punishment, she was taken from them never to return. Mrs Carter came back to the parlour with a very grave countenance. It was with real difficulty that she said to them, 'Clara Manners is gone. Her aunt has taken charge of her for the present. She sent a message of remembrance to you all.' Mrs Carter paused as if desirous to discover the effect of her intelligence. No one ventured to reply or thank her. Ruth, who at other times was the first to speak, dropped her handkerchief on the floor and stooped for it. Her face was not clearly seen until Mrs Carter said—

'You may go to the school-room; all, except Harriet, Florence, and Janet.'

Ruth went with her companions to the school-room, and busied herself with her books. The struggle that was passing in her mind was terrible. It was more than she could bear, and her resolution was taken. Should Janet be punished she would instantly confess. Alas! even then Ruth's decision was not that of true repentance; it was not the result of self-ex-

Digitized by Google

amination and humility; it was but the sudden impulse of a goading conscience, and when Mrs Carter came back, and announced to the whole school that Harriet and Florence were forgiven, and that Janet's assertion was accepted, from the doubt whether the book had not been mislaid by accident, and in the absence of more positive proof against her, Ruth sank back to her former state of mind, and said to herself that confession was uncalled for; the fault that she had committed was trifling—it would never be repeated; Janet was not now injured by her silence; and confession would only lower her influence in the school, vex Mrs Carter, and distress her parents. Her future conduct should entirely make amends for any error of which she had been guilty.

Poor Ruth! she was storing up bitter hours for herself. She did not remember what she had so often been taught, that no goodness of her own, even could the remainder of her life be perfect, could atone for the smallest sin in the sight of God. Forgiven indeed all may be, even the worst of sinners, for the sake of the Saviour, who bore the punishment of all sin; but before we can obtain this forgiveness there must be the humble acknowledgment of guilt, both to God and our fellow-men, if our offence has been against both; that acknowledgment from which Ruth in the pride of her heart still strove to escape.

And this was the state of affairs on the morning of the 15th of June; the holiday, the election day—the day which Ruth had once thought of as far off, yet earnestly to be desired; the day which now she dreaded, so as she had never dreaded any other day of her life. It was strange to see how soon all things had in a great measure returned to their former state. Clara's name was not mentioned, even Justine le Vergnier was not openly regretted. It seemed as if disagreeable recollections were by common consent to be banished, and if any secretly sighed for Clara's high spirits or Justine's amusing anecdotes, they did not choose to do more than express a passing regret. The adorning of the room and the preparations for the day's ceremony had taken the place of every other idea.

'Mary Vernon! Where is Mary? we must have her,' was the general cry in the school-room after breakfast. Mary had returned late on the previous evening; even Ruth had not seen her then.

'Mary is hearing the history from Mrs Carter,' said Fanny Wilson. 'I know Mrs Carter sent for her to the study.'

Digitized by Google

An uncomfortable pause followed. Florence and Harriet began talking about some coloured paper flowers with which the chair of the judge was to be decorated; and Alice whispered to Madeline, that Mary would not speak to her now, she was sure.

'O Alice! how can you think so?' exclaimed Madeline. 'Mary never was hard to any one in all her life; and, besides, Mrs Carter is not going to mention anything about you. She said she would not.'

'I wish I could be sure,' said Alice.

'I am quite, and I will ask Ruth.'

Ruth was sitting in a comfortable chair by the window: it was open; the fresh air blew pleasantly upon her face, the birds sang sweetly in her ear, her pale face had a tinge of colour upon it; she smiled when her sister came near, and Madeline thought that she was happy. Alice stood at a little distance and watched her. Before Madeline had finished what she had to say, Jessie O'Neile ran up and interrupted her. A friend of her mamma's, who lived near, had just sent her some early strawberries; Jessie did not care about herself, she only thought of her dear Ruth, and now she pressed her to eat them all, for she had brought them on purpose. Ruth accepted the present gratefully, and Jessie stood by delighted for a short time, and presently went away to fetch a footstool. Two more of the party came back with Jessie. They had been preparing evergreens and flowers, and had made up a pretty little nosegay, which they thought Ruth would like; and they wished to consult her about a crown which they had an idea of making for the judge. These drew others to the same spot, and, one by one, nearly all collected round Ruth at the open window, interested about her, consulting her, making her the first person. Still Alice stood alone, and looked on. 'Delightful! here is Mary Vernon,' she heard Madeline exclaim; and as Mary came in, a way was opened for her, and a seat provided for her by Ruth's side; and Alice thought that the kiss and inquiry which followed would never have been bestowed upon her. Mary had scarcely had time to speak to Ruth before; but since breakfast she had received an account of all that had transpired from Mrs Carter, and with it of Ruth's indisposition; and both Mrs Carter and Mary imagined it possible that the headache of which Ruth still complained might be increased, if not caused by the painful excitement into which the school had been thrown.

Digitized by Google

'Should you like to be Ruth, Alice?' said a quiet, melancholy voice, close at Alice's side.

'Janet! you quite startled me; I thought you were in the next room.'

'Why don't you help, Alice?' continued Janet.

'They can do without me,' replied Alice, 'now Mary is come.'

'But I thought you cared so much, and were taking such pains. What makes you give it up?'

'Because I am not wanted; that is all.'

'They don't seem to think of any one but Ruth,' said Janet.

'No, but Ruth deserves it.'

There was a heavy, weary sigh from Janet. 'Mamma did not know what school was when she sent me here,' she said; 'it makes me a great deal worse than I was before.'

'Worse,' repeated Alice; 'what do you mean?'

'I hate it all,' replied Janet; 'so would you if you were like me.'

'I cannot understand, Janet, you are so very odd; what is the matter?'

'Ruth is very happy,' continued Janet; 'every one loves her and praises her.'

'They praise her because she is good,' replied Alice; 'I should like to be good too.'

'But I am not sure mamma would think Ruth good,' pursued Janet; 'yet they all put her up, and put me down.'

'O Janet! how silly; no one thinks of putting you down.'

'Mrs Carter does,' said Janet: 'she never suspected Ruth, and she did me.'

'The drawer was yours, that was the reason; Mrs Carter has quite forgotten it all.'

'Has she? No, Alice, she does not forget; none of them do. They will never make me judge, if I live here for ever.'

'Then you are envious!' exclaimed Alice; 'and of Ruth!'

'I do not think I am envious; but I would rather be Ruth than any person in all the world.'

'Rather than Mary Vernon?'

'Yes, because she has no mother, and no sister, and Ruth has everything. Look at them all now, and the fruit, and the flowers. And this afternoon she will be judge, and first of all.'

'I do not care about those things,' said Alice; 'I would rather Ruth should have them.'

Digitized by Google

'I never knew I cared till I came to school,' said Janet; 'but school makes me wicked. And you are like the rest, Alice; you all look down upon me.'

'If you mean about the book, Janet,' exclaimed Alice, with some degree of impatience, 'you are quite mistaken. I do not believe you had anything to do with it.'

'Really! upon your honour?' asked Janet.

'Yes, really, upon my honour; what makes you doubt?'

'I cannot help doubting,' answered Janet, 'I am so unhappy; and now they are all cheerful again, it is worse. If I could only be Ruth; she has everything.'

Alice was sorry for Janet, but there was something in her tone and manner which irritated her; a whining fretfulness, with which it was difficult to sympathise. Her old dislike revived strongly, and she went away hastily, leaving Janet more convinced by her manner that she was still suspected, than she was satisfied by her words. Mary Vernon having finished what she had to say to Ruth, was looking round for some one else. Her eye caught Janet's, and she smiled, but Janet did not smile in return. Mary looked at Ruth, as if asking for an explanation; and, breaking away from those who were pressing round seeking her advice and assistance, she went to speak to Janet. Alice was in her way as she passed, and there was a cordial shake of the hand, which, with a few kind words, made Alice return to her companions happier. If Mary knew how wrong she had been, it was evident that she did not despise her.

'Ruth, dear, do help us about this wreath,' said Fanny Wilson; 'it is to go round the mirror at the bottom of the room.' Ruth took no notice, and Madeline touched her to make her attend. Ruth started and shuddered; but she recovered herself, and gave her opinion. Then again her eye rested upon Mary and Janet, as if drawn by some power which could not be resisted.

'Janet thinks she is suspected, still,' said Alice, watching Ruth's glance; 'I hope Mary will put the idea out of her head. It makes her more tiresome than ever.'

'You should not call her tiresome,' said Madeline; 'should she, Ruth? We should be just the same if we had been suspected, I daresay; at least, I should.'

A conversation followed about suspicion—the painfulness of unjust suspicion—being the cause of it; during which Ruth pulled to pieces the evergreens which lay near her, and once or

Digitized by Google

twice made some indifferent remark, and at length confessed to Madeline that her head was beginning to ache more, and she should like to go into the garden.

Mary Vernon's conversation with Janet was a long one, and as it went on, Ruth walked up and down the terrace with Madeline, in a state of great nervous anxiety. But though Mary and Janet spoke much of Ruth, it was not with any allusion to the lost book. Janet was soon satisfied, as satisfied as with her peevish disposition she ever could be, that Mary Vernon was quite willing to believe her word. She owned that she was pleased; contented, she said, with Mary's confidence; but the sad, low, drawling tone was not very like contentment; and when Mary proposed to her to go to the others and assist in ornamenting the room, Janet declined.

'Why?' inquired Mary. 'If you are sure they are as fond of you as before, why should you keep aloof?'

'They are not fond of me,' replied Janet; 'they care only for Ruth; she is first with every one.'

'But, Janet, dear, you must not be so envious.'

'I do not want to do any harm to Ruth,' said Janet; 'I only wish I could be in her place.'

'You don't care for the fruit and the flowers, I am sure,' said Mary, laughing.

'No, not for anything in particular; but all—she is so much better off than I am, and I don't see why she should be.'

Mary looked pained, and after a little delay, said gently, 'Indeed, Janet, that feeling is wrong. I think your mamma must have taught you that it is; for you say she was always talking to you about the Bible, and your duty.'

Janet regarded Mary as she said this with more interest, and a sense of sympathy. 'I wonder whether you think about the Bible as much as mamma does,' she said. 'I fancied just now that there was no one here who thought about it, they all seemed so wicked; and whenever I say anything out of the Bible, they laugh or turn away, even Madeline does; that shows they dislike it.'

'Not quite,' replied Mary, with a smile; 'only they do not like your repeating it.'

'It is just the same; it is because they are not good.'

'Perhaps even if we were good, we should not always like it,' answered Mary; 'because it does not always suit what we are doing. The Bible words are sacred, and when we mix them up

Digitized by Google

with common words, even if there is no harm in the common words, they do not seem fitting. I know many good people who can scarcely bring themselves to name the Name of God, or our Blessed Saviour in general conversation, because they feel so much reverence.'

'That is not at all what I have been accustomed to,' replied Janet; 'and a great many laugh.'

'Not those who are serious-minded. The careless ones laugh, as they would at everything connected with religion; the others are silent, I know, I have watched them often. But, Janet, will you let me say one thing to you. Don't you think it is better whilst we are young, and when we have no right to put ourselves forward, to think more about doing right, setting a good example, than talking, even if we are quite in earnest? It seems to me that it is safer.'

'I don't know what you mean by safer,' said Janet.

'Less likely to make us conceited and criticising; because when our whole hearts are set upon doing our duty, we see so much evil in ourselves, that we learn to judge charitably of others.'

'I am much more wicked since I came to school,' observed Janet, in a musing tone.

'And what has made you so?' asked Mary.

Janet's reply was quick and earnest.

'The things I see make me so. They none of them care for all that I have cared for, and they dislike me and ridicule me, and they think only of Ruth; she has everything she wishes. I would exchange with her this instant.'

'Hush! Janet; pray take care. Such a thought cannot be right. We are told not to desire anything which is our neighbour's.'

'Not houses, and sheep, and cows, and those things,' replied Janet.

'Anything,' again repeated Mary; 'we are not to desire anything, not any change at all, except that of becoming better. And, Janet, sometimes we know that persons' ignorant wishes have been heard, and they have been miserable.'

'I should not be miserable if I were Ruth,' replied Janet.

'Indeed—indeed, you do not know what you are saying, Janet. You cannot tell what you are wishing.'

Ruth came in from the garden at this instant; she looked tired, and Mary's glance was an anxious one.

'Ruth is not well,' she remarked, turning again to Janet.

Digitized by Google

'She will be better soon; I should not care for that,' replied Janet.

'And she looks grave—sad, quite,' continued Mary.

'She has no cause for it,' said Janet.

'She may have things to make her unhappy which we do not know of,' added Mary.

'She cannot have as much as I have. Still I would be her.'

Mary said no more. She was called away abruptly, and the conversation ended; but before the close of that day Janet had received a lasting warning against the folly of her blind and discontented wishes.

As the morning hour wore on, the two rooms gradually assumed a different aspect. The doors between them were kept open; the desks and tables were placed against the wall, so as to be entirely out of the way; all the stray books were put into the closet, and the benches, chairs, and stools were ranged in rows at the bottom of the outer room. Near the centre doorway was a round table, ornamented with two jars of flowers, and holding in the middle a china vase, into which the papers containing the votes were to be dropped. Two arm-chairs were provided for Mrs Carter and Miss Barnard on each side of the table, and at the top of the inner room was a high seat, or, as it was called, a throne, decked with evergreens and flowers, and placed under a canopy prettily contrived by the aid of some bright-coloured shawls and bouquets of flowers. There were evergreens also about the room, flowers on the mantelpiece, a wreath made especially for Mrs Carter's picture, which hung over it; and, before the preparations were quite ended, room was found on one of the side-tables for some wine, and cake, and fruit, sent by Mrs Carter's desire, that they might in due form wish health and prosperity to the new judge.

'Ruth, we must just ornament the fruit and cake dishes, and then we shall be quite ready. Does it not look nice?' said Alice, coming up to her.

Ruth smiled a faint, sickly smile.

'And all for you,' continued Alice, not noticing her manner; 'it is quite certain. You must be well and enjoy it. How is your head now?'

'Better,' Ruth said, shortly; but the answer was not honest.

'Hark! there is the dinner bell? Is everything ready?' exclaimed Madeline.

'Everything except the flowers round the dishes.'

Digitized by Google

Alice, Madeline, and Fanny Wilson promised to come in directly dinner was over, and arrange them.

'I don't want any dinner,' said Ruth, in an under-tone, to her sister. 'I would much rather stay here.'

'O Ruth! are you so very unwell? Perhaps we had better not have all the fuss. What shall we do?' Madeline turned to Mary Vernon before Ruth could interpose to prevent her. 'Ruth is ill, Mary, she cannot go in to dinner.'

Mary appeared vexed and uneasy.

'Dear Ruth, why did you not say so before? The noise has been too much for you.'

'No, not ill—not ill at all,' answered Ruth, and she stood up and walked into the dining-room.

Mary did not offer to go with her. Some painful idea seemed to have struck her, and she lingered till the last. Her place was filled up; the absence of a few days had made it seem natural to be without her, and when some one offered to move, Mary declined, and took her seat at the corner end of the table on the opposite side to Ruth.

'My dear Mary, you have as bad an appetite as Ruth,' said Mrs Carter. 'I must have a physician for you both.'

Mary smiled, and began to eat, but from time to time her eyes were raised stealthily to Ruth, as if she would not be seen watching, and yet desired to know all that Ruth was doing. It was a short dinner, and when the cloth was removed, Alice, Fanny, and Madeline returned to the school-room; the others were to remain where they were until summoned to the election of the judge. Mrs Carter and Miss Barnard went away also. Janet Harding looked wistfully after Alice, who was the last to leave the parlour.

'Would you like to go to the school-room, Janet?' said Mary, who was standing by Ruth's chair.

'I should like it, if they would have me,' answered Janet.

'They would like it, would they not, Ruth? You can answer for Madeline.'

Ruth assented, but so feebly, that Janet was annoyed.

'I did not mean to interfere,' she said. 'I know quite well that Ruth is first, and is to have all things her own way.'

Ruth turned uneasily in her chair.

'Say something that may soothe her, if you can,' whispered Mary.

Ruth's lips moved, but that was all.

'You would be glad for her to help, if it would please her?' pursued Mary.

Digitized by Google

'No, Mary,' interrupted Janet, proudly; 'Ruth does not want me to do anything for her; she has a spite against me, like the others.'

'Oh! nonsense, Janet. Do tell her, Ruth, how foolish it is to have such fancies.'

'Very foolish,' repeated Ruth, mechanically.

'But it is no nonsense,' replied Janet. 'Ruth never troubles herself about me; and she did not say a single word yesterday, and she has not to-day, about the book.'

'That must have been because she was not well, and did not think it necessary,' said Mary. 'When you declared you knew nothing of it, she believed you at once. Was not that it, Ruth?'

Ruth's hand trembled violently, as it rested on the arm of a sofa near. She drew the other over her face, but it did not serve her purpose of concealment. Mary saw that she was very much agitated.

'What can be the matter? Speak to me, Ruth; just tell me,' she said.

Janet drew nearer, half in curiosity, half in alarm.

Ruth motioned her back, and, in a broken voice, whispered —'Mary, in pity keep her away; I cannot bear it.'

'She is not well, Janet; she will be better presently; just ask Miss Barnard for her salts.'

'No, no; I am well—quite well. Pray don't go.'

Ruth looked up, her face pale as ashes, her lips quivering. Mary took her hand.

'Ruth, you frighten me,' she said.

Ruth's eyes were still fixed upon Janet.

'If she would go away—if she would not stare at me! Do make her go.'

Mary quietly begged that Janet would leave them to themselves; the fewer that were about Ruth the better, and Janet moved slowly away.

'Is she gone?' said Ruth, raising her head.

'Yes, gone to the others. Are you better now? What makes you feel so ill?'

'Ill!—no, I don't feel ill—not exactly—I can't tell—Mary, what shall I do?' and Ruth leaned her head upon Mary's shoulder and gasped for breath.

'You must let me speak to Mrs Carter; I must stop the noise and bustle, dearest Ruth,' said Mary, much frightened; 'you are not equal to it.'

Digitized by Google

Ruth caught her hand, and held it very tight. 'Mary, you will not—I could not bear it. It must all be, now,' she added, in a low voice.

'What must be, Ruth? Are you really ill?' Mary's voice was earnest, full of deep anxiety. She looked steadfastly at Ruth, and their eyes met; and then Ruth took away her hand, exclaiming, 'I am quite well, indeed, Mary. I can bear it all. They are ready, see.'

'Prepared! all prepared!' exclaimed Fanny Wilson, rushing into the room. Madeline came up to Ruth. 'We have such a comfortable seat for you, the old seat by the window, and we have put a cushion and a footstool. Dear Ruth, is your poor head better?'

'Leave her with me one minute, Madeline,' said Mary Vernon, gravely. 'Ruth,' she continued, as Madeline went aside, 'I do not think I am right in letting you go through all this excitement, and I cannot understand you. Is there anything you are keeping from me?'

Ruth shook like an aspen leaf, but made no reply.

'Come! you must come! Mrs Carter is there, it is all ready,' cried Fanny. 'Mary and Ruth, what are you doing?'

The room was nearly empty, for the greater number hurried away at the first summons. Madeline had been sent for by Alice. Janet Harding remained. Ruth's eye rested upon her with an expression of intense pain.

'Mrs Carter is quite ready,' again called out some one, coming to the door.

'Ruth, have you a secret? are you ill? Why will you make me so unhappy?' said Mary.

Ruth was standing up; she sat down again, and buried her face in her hands.

'Is Mary Vernon here?' inquired Miss Barnard, entering the room.

Mary glanced at Ruth imploringly, but her manner was in an instant changed; all her self-command seem restored, and rising once more, she led the way into the school-room. The sight which presented itself was unusually gay and pretty. The benches were filled; and Mrs Carter and Miss Barnard were seated by the round table, the brilliant colours of the canopy were arranged with great taste, and amongst the dark evergreens shone many of the earliest and most delicate summer flowers, now touched by the glancing, flickering rays of the

Digitized by Google

afternoon sun. All seemed glad, pure, and bright. Ruth's head was erect, her step was firm, as she entered the room. If there was an uneasiness in the glance of her eyes, and something forced in her manner, the signs were too trifling to be generally remarked. But Mary's face caught the attention of several. A whisper went round, it met Ruth's ear. It was said that Mary was sad, that she was thinking of Clara and Justine. Madeline remarked to Ruth, that it appeared wrong entirely to forget them, and Ruth pretended not to hear, and remained silent.

Mrs Carter looked round to see if all were assembled. Then she stood up and spoke to them, kindly and earnestly. She said that it might seem at first sight a mere matter of amusement for which they were collected together; and that she would have left them entirely to themselves, if it had not been their own wish that she should be present; but it was a great satisfaction to her—they could little tell how great—to join with them, to be one with them in their interests and pleasures. And in this instance, she could not help feeling that the object for which they had met was beyond amusement. To her, it was one of great importance; perhaps, some of them would agree with her, all probably would who could trace the improvement which had taken place in the school during the last two years. When Mary Vernon was first appointed judge, there was prevalent amongst them, besides a frequent neglect of orders, a tone of carelessness about serious things, and sometimes even of irreverence. It was often the cause of great regret and anxiety both to her sister and herself. However they might strive to enforce right principles whilst with their pupils, there were times when necessarily they were left alone, and at those times great mischief was done. 'Such mischief,' continued Mrs Carter, 'still no doubt exists; painful experience has shown us all that it does so; but how much it has been lessened by Mary's constant watchfulness, I could not have imagined if my own observations had not given me proof. Even the late distressing circumstances have, I believe, chiefly arisen because she was obliged to be more absent from the school-room than before. Mary knows that she possesses my gratitude, and love, and esteem,' added Mrs Carter; 'she will not require any assurances of them now; I would rather speak, my children, to any among you who may be expecting to succeed her. Her influence may be yours, if only you will seek it

Digitized by Google

in the same way. I think you must all know what that way is—you must all feel that it is good example. But, perhaps, some of you will not be inclined to think with me, that it is a very serious matter, whether this example is or is not set. Yet I am sure, that if Mary were asked how it was that she was able to keep such a watch over herself, she would say that it was because watchfulness was made the subject of her daily prayers, because she knew that her position in the school was a trust given her, not by me, nor by you, but by God; and that she must one day answer to Him for the manner in which she had exercised it. This was her view of the office she undertook. It is my earnest hope, that such may be the view of whoever may succeed her.' Mrs Carter paused; involuntarily her eye rested upon Ruth. It was a glance of calm satisfaction and approval.

Ruth was leaning her head against the wall; her fingers played nervously with a bouquet of flowers which had been placed near her; her face was bent down, and Mary was turning towards her, half unmindful of the public praise which she was receiving in her desire to read the secrets of Ruth's heart.

'I would not mar the cheerfulness of your spirits, my children,' once more continued Mrs Carter, 'by the anxious thoughts which are crowding upon mine, and I can scarcely expect that any, even the most serious minded, should think of the choice now to be made as I think of it; but, upon whomsoever that choice may now fall, she may be certain that both my sister and myself shall look with gratitude and affection upon every endeavour after right conduct; that we shall aid her to the very utmost of our power, and pray for her with a sincerity of affection and interest which even the love of a parent can scarcely surpass. Now may the blessing of God be with you, my children, especially, most especially upon her whom you are about to elect to be your example and guide.'

There was a deep stillness when the last words were spoken, and Mrs Carter resumed her seat. Mary Vernon touched Ruth's hand; it was of an icy coldness, and she did not move.

'Jessie,' said Mrs Carter, in a lighter tone than before, 'I hear you are to be the first to give your vote.'

Jessie sprang forward, exclaiming, 'I vote for Ruth;' but she was stopped.

'Hush! hush! no one must tell,' exclaimed Fanny Wilson. 'Where is your paper? Is the name written?'

Digitized by Google

Jessie produced her paper, and walking up to the table, laid it in the vase, turning round as she did so to nod and smile meaningly at Ruth; and then, according to Fanny Wilson's direction, proceeding into the inner room, and taking her seat by the side of the judge's chair. Ellen Hastings followed, then another, and another, slowly, regularly, and silently.

Though the election was almost certainly determined beforehand, a sudden awe and suspense had stolen over them.

'It is Ruth's turn; Ruth must vote herself,' exclaimed Alice, as Madeline moved into the inner room.

Mrs Carter turned to her sister with a smile. 'Ruth will be in a difficulty,' she said; 'her vote will be the exception.'

'Ruth! why does she not come?' inquired one or two impatiently from the inner room.

'They are waiting, dear Ruth; look up,' whispered Mary Vernon. 'Ruth, dear, do speak,' she continued.

Ruth raised her head hurriedly. 'My turn! did they say it was my turn?'

'Yes, yours; but the others shall go before you. Harriet and Florence, it is for you to vote next;' and Harriet and Florence passed on in order.

'My turn now,' said Mary, smiling. She placed her paper with the others, and then returned to Ruth.

'I must go; I shall vote for Fanny,' said Ruth. She tried to rise, but her limbs shook, and she caught the back of the chair.

'It is too much excitement, we must not let it go on,' said Mrs Carter, speaking across the table to her sister. 'Ruth, my love, stay where you are; Mary, you bring her vote.'

Ruth's paper was placed with the rest.

'Now,' said Mrs Carter, as she stood up again, 'we will read the names and count.'

The party in the inner room crowded near.

Mrs Carter drew the vase towards her, and began to open the papers. 'Ruth! it is only Ruth; scarcely more than one name. But for form's sake we must count.'

Mrs Carter repeated the names in an audible voice.

Madeline could contain her delight no longer, and rushing forward, she threw herself upon Ruth's neck. 'O Ruth! the pleasure—if papa and mamma were but here!'

Ruth smiled; it was a ghastly smile.

Hark! what sounds were those? The noise of carriage-

Digitized by Google

wheels, the opening of a gate, the quick trampling of horses' feet, the thundering knock and pealing bell.

A hush of expectation! Ruth sank back in her chair, resting as a prisoner reprieved.

Dawson entered, and said something in a low tone to Mrs Carter.

'It will soon be over; can you keep up?' whispered Mary Vernon to Ruth.

Ruth nodded assent.

'Who can it be? A visitor? How provoking!' were the murmurs which went round.

'Silence! Mrs Carter is returning; it is her step.' But it was not her step.

'Dear Ruth, shall I ask for you to go away?' inquired Madeline.

The answer was a faint, sharp cry, and Ruth started from her seat.

Madeline's glance followed hers. 'Papa! our own papa!' she rushed forward.

Mr Clifford was at the door.

'Papa come! my dear papa!' Madeline threw herself into his arms.

He held her, kissed her tenderly, again and again; but his eye wandered. 'Ruth, my darling Ruth! my treasure!'

Cold, upright, still, Ruth stood—but for one instant only; the next, and she was kneeling at Mrs Carter's feet in penitence and shame. 'I hid the book; forgive me; speak for me; ask him to forgive me. It was not Janet; I did it. Oh! speak to him. He will not kiss me; speak for me, forgive me.' Ruth hid her face, and burst into an agony of tears.

'Ruth! my child!' Mr Clifford drew near, and would have raised her, but she turned her head away from him.

'He must not love me. I have deceived; I have done so wrongly. O Madeline! stay with me, do not all leave me.' Ruth's voice failed her.

Mr Clifford lifted her up, and placed her in a chair, and then, with a look of intense anxiety, appealed to Mrs Carter for an explanation.

Mary Vernon came near and supported Ruth's head upon her shoulder, and whispered: 'Ruth, dearest, for your papa's sake, be calm; tell him if you can. No one but yourself knows what this means.' She stooped and kissed Ruth's forehead,

Digitized by Google

and Ruth, soothed by the expression of sympathy at such a moment, made an effort at self-command.

'Shall we be together alone, my child?' said Mr Clifford in a tone the very quietness of which proved the agitation of his mind; but Ruth shook her head. Her lips quivered, and again her tears fell fast; but now they were quiet tears, bitter but salutary, the relief of an overburdened mind. 'I will tell here, papa,' she said, as she held her father's hand and spoke in a broken voice; and then leaving her seat, she stood, still clasping her father's hand, and stealthily raising her eye to his in doubt and fear.

'You are right, Ruth,' replied Mr Clifford; 'right to confess before all, if in the knowledge of all you have offended.'

'But it may be too much for her,' interposed Mrs Carter.

'She will bear it,' said Mr Clifford. 'She will be happier afterwards. Ruth, can you tell us now?' And Ruth waited but for an instant, and then in a rapid yet firm voice, she owned her fault and its consequences. She told of her search after the missing volume; the temptation to which she yielded in reading it; the shame which seized her; and the impulse of fear which induced her to hide the book; the impossibility afterwards of restoring it to its former place; and the weakness of principle, and pride of heart, which had induced her to keep the secret of her conduct concealed; and to allow another to be blamed unjustly for her offence. The confession was without evasion or excuse; it was listened to in breathless silence. Madeline's eyes were riveted on her sister's pale face, and Alice's chain was twisted with nervous eagerness. Ruth stopped, and Madeline sprang forward and exclaimed, 'She is best still; no one would have told as she has done.'

Mr Clifford held up his finger to check her. 'Stay, Madeline; Ruth has grievously sinned. We will hope and pray that she may be forgiven;' and as he said this he turned towards Mrs Carter. Whilst Ruth was recounting the history of her fault, Mrs Carter's manner had been that of quiet, fixed attention. Her head was bent forward to catch each word as it fell, and not a muscle of her face moved.

'Can Mrs Carter forgive?' said Mr Clifford, and he drew Ruth forward. Mrs Carter looked up; tears were dimming her eyes—tears for Ruth's sin.

'God forgive you, even as I do, my own Ruth,' she said. Mr Clifford's hand rested upon his child's head, in the attitude

Digitized by Google

of blessing. His lips moved in prayer. Ruth's glance was raised for an instant. She would have stepped forward, she would have taken the hand which Mrs Carter extended towards her, but her head grew confused and her eyelids fell, and she caught her father's arm, and, almost unconscious from excitement and misery of feeling, was carried from the room.

It was towards evening before Mr Clifford thought it desirable to see Ruth again. She was then lying on the sofa in Mrs Carter's study, where she had been taken to be free from the possibility of interruption or excitement. There could be no doubt that she was penitent; that she was conscious of the offence of which she had been guilty, in the sight of God as well as before man. Ruth's heart once softened, all her holier feelings returned. The veil had fallen from her eyes, and she saw herself in her true light. There were many reasons, however, to be afraid for the future. Ruth's fault was a very subtle one. It would recur continually in different shapes; it might sometimes assume the appearance of a virtue. Nothing but watchfulness, sincere and unremitting, would enable her to guard against it. And Ruth could scarcely be expected to practise such watchfulness. She had as yet given but slight proofs of ever having attempted it; and at school, the temptations to forgetfulness were very great. Mr Clifford had left home almost with a determination that this should be the last half-year which his children should spend at school. An occasion had offered itself for resuming his former plans. Mrs Clifford's sister was about to return to England, in consequence of her husband's ill health. It was Mrs Beresford's wish to spend the year which they were to pass in England with them. This would give Mrs Clifford the opportunity of again devoting herself to her two little girls, and by the time Captain and Mrs Mordaunt went back to India, and Mrs Beresford again became an inmate of Laneton, Ruth and Madeline would have reached an age when they would not so much require the constant care of a governess, and might without difficulty pursue their studies at home, under their mother's inspection. Mr Clifford's only doubt as to this arrangement had arisen from the progress which his children appeared to have made at school. They were improving rapidly in general acquirements, and he had not as yet discovered that their minds had received any injury. He could not help trusting that Mrs Carter's high principles and warm interest in her pupils had

Digitized by Google

succeeded in so raising the tone of the school, that his children might still be safe there. But this day's experience had undeceived him. Whatever a school-life might be for others, even for Madeline, it was evidently undesirable for Ruth. The pride of her character required a constant guard, such a guard as Mrs Carter, with all her endeavours, would scarcely be able to keep. Where there were so many to superintend, it was not possible that unremitting attention should be bestowed upon any one; and, after a long consultation with Mrs Carter herself, it was decided by both that the departure of Ruth and Madeline should be final.

'They must return with me to-morrow,' said Mr Clifford, as he left Mrs Carter to seek Ruth in the study. 'The business which called me to town, and made me break in upon you so unexpectedly, will also oblige me not to delay longer than I can help. I can scarcely wish to do so; my poor child's position will be so painful.'

Mrs Carter could not but agree, though the idea of parting with the children weighed heavily upon her mind. Perhaps never, till the moment of Ruth's confession, had she known how entirely she trusted and loved her. 'And poor Alice,' she said, 'without her young companions, what will she do?'

'I had a conversation with Lady Catharine Hyde, before I left home,' replied Mr Clifford. 'It seemed right to inform her of my possible determination; but it will make no difference to her. She is too fixed in her plan. Alice is to be educated at school till she has passed her fifteenth birthday.'

'It may be best,' said Mrs Carter, after a short consideration. 'There is much that is good in Alice; she has begun to resist temptation, to act upon principle. Lady Catharine may be assured that no care of mine shall be wanting.'

'And she will receive from you that which she much needs,' replied Mr Clifford; 'I mean affection. It is love by which Alice must be governed. It would be an inexpressible satisfaction to me to feel that she would receive it at the Manor.'

Mrs Carter faintly smiled. 'We must hope,' she answered, 'that as Alice grows older, she may be able to understand the warmth that lies hidden by a cold manner. I think she does in a manner now.'

'Poor child!' said Mr Clifford, sighing. 'It would grieve me to think of her loneliness, but that one learns to trust all these things to a Higher Power.'

Digitized by Google

'I have great hopes of her, unstable though her character is,' continued Mrs Carter. 'The time may be long, and the effort required may be great, but I do believe, that hereafter she will be all that she could wish, like'—— Mrs Carter stopped suddenly, and Mr Clifford, as he opened the door, said, 'Children little imagine the pain their faults cause. Ruth may be very unhappy, but she would scarcely exchange feelings with me.' Mr Clifford went to Ruth. She was lying still and exhausted. She could not bear to look at her papa; she trembled when he spoke to her; her eyelids were swollen with crying. Mr Clifford's manner was, at first, grave, and it might even have been thought stern. He had no wish to make Ruth a heroine. He did not feel, and he did not desire her to feel, that a late repentance and confession were virtues. Forgive he could, fully and freely, but he did not conceal that he was deeply pained and disappointed. Ruth felt more alive to the true state of her own heart, when her father talked over her fault quietly, and examined into it, and discussed it, than she had done under the great excitement of the morning. Feeling then had carried her through all; she could have confessed worse faults; she could have humbled herself infinitely more; she could have endured any punishment: but the probability would have been, that, when the passionate burst of distress was over, the original fault would have resumed its power. All great exhibitions of feeling are to be dreaded. There may be a theatrical show of repentance as well as of zeal or affection. Ruth's tears now were very quiet and very real. A short time convinced Mr Clifford of this, and then he turned to the point to which he especially desired to direct her mind. 'There is no occasion for me, my dear Ruth,' he said, 'to tell you against Whom you have sinned; that you know as fully as I do. But, when you said your prayers, did the thought never enter your mind, that they were a mockery?' Ruth seemed shocked at the expression. 'Yes, indeed they were a mockery,' continued Mr Clifford. 'They were the prayers of a double mind; of a heart conscious of sin, yet unwilling to forsake it. Ruth, my child, it would have made me very miserable if I had known this.'

'Papa, I did try to attend sometimes,' said Ruth.

'Attend to the meaning of the words, perhaps; but the feeling, the sincerity, the hearty wish, they must have been absent. God will never accept our prayers without them; and if we do not pray, we cannot be safe under His protection; and then,

Digitized by Google

Ruth, it might have been the will of God that during those sad days you should die.'

Ruth shuddered, and, looking up in her father's face, said—

'Papa, I have prayed now.'

'And I have prayed too, Ruth,' replied Mr Clifford, as he stooped to kiss her. 'I am sure we must both be happier.'

A faint gleam of pleasure passed over Ruth's pale face. She placed her hand within her father's, and he held it fondly.

'Papa,' she said, venturing to raise her eyes to his, 'perhaps God will forgive me for your prayers.'

'For the prayers of One who loves you infinitely better than I or any other human being can ever do, my darling child,' replied Mr Clifford.

'For our Saviour's sake,' murmured Ruth.

For an instant Mr Clifford paused. The expression of his face was that of intense thought—more than thought, devotion.

'Ruth,' he said at length, 'you cannot tell, you can scarcely think, the gratitude which that love demands. To be forgiven! to have offended deeply, as we all offend, and to sin, not once or twice, but every hour! to act against warnings and instructions wilfully, and still to have hope! to know, from the very words of our blessed Lord, that, "even unto seventy times seven," there is pardon, if only we repent, and trust, and pray. My own dear child, shall we not both try to show our love also?'

Ruth could not find a voice to answer.

'For you there is one way above all others,' continued Mr Clifford. 'Will you watch yourself, Ruth? watch your thoughts? —there lies the origin of your sin—very, very deep—in your wishes; coveting admiration and human applause; thinking upon it; allowing yourself to put it before you as a point to be obtained. You wished for power and influence, such as Mary Vernon's; that you have acknowledged. God had placed you in an inferior position, and you desired a higher one. You would not have taken any wrong means to obtain it, but you suffered your thoughts to dwell upon it. The sins of our wishes are more ensnaring than any others. Covetousness, which is ranked with stealing and murder, is but the sin of a wish. Will you, my child, tell me that you will watch yourself?'

Ruth's 'yes' was not very intelligible; but her father read her thoughts in her countenance, and was satisfied.

Digitized by Google

'For the future,' he said, 'you must make strict rules; one in particular, against day-dreams. We wish: then we indulge ourselves in fancying how it would be if we were to obtain our wishes; then the wish becomes stronger, and grows into a real longing desire; and at last we act. Check your day-dreams. Check every thought of what people may say or think of you. Never repeat praise to yourself; when you hear it, try to remember how different you are in the sight of God, how unworthy even when you do your best. If you can do this, even in a slight degree, you will have taken a great step towards overcoming the defects of your natural character. If you do not, you may humble yourself to the dust before your fellow-creatures, but you will not be humble in the eye of God.'

'Papa, I will try,' said Ruth.

'And pray,' continued Mr Clifford; 'and then,' he added, reverently, 'we will both pray; now, shall we not, Ruth?'

Ruth clasped her hands together, and knelt by the side of her father, whilst in the language of the Church, fervently, though in a low and faltering voice, Mr Clifford acknowledged for his child that she had 'erred and strayed from God's ways like a lost sheep; that she had left undone those things which she ought to have done, and had done those things which she ought not to have done;' and entreated that the 'God who is always more ready to hear than we to pray, would pour down upon her the abundance of His mercy; forgiving her those things whereof her conscience was afraid, and giving her those good things which she was not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE wakening of the next morning was a wakening to pain and regret with many besides Ruth. To be disappointed in those we have respected, is a grief early experienced and long remembered. Ruth's fault was little spoken of, for it was felt too deeply. Those who might have been inclined to criticise and discuss it were checked, if by no other consideration, by the presence of Madeline.

Poor Madeline! It was sad indeed to see her, so downcast,

Digitized by Google

so shy; shrinking from observation, and clinging only to Alice, as if she herself had been guilty. Alice's sympathy fully went with Madeline. Ruth's confession was startling to her; it seemed a dream. She looked around, and thought for the moment that honesty and truth were nowhere to be found. When Ruth had failed, upon whom could dependence be placed? To see Janet Harding distressed and irritated her. She knew that the feeling was unfair, but there was a general reaction now in favour of Janet, who had never yet been a favourite. A sense of justice made all willing to atone for any past unkindness, by showing that they were sorry for the false accusation. And it was difficult for Janet to take this notice quietly. She was a little inclined to play the heroine; to talk of all she had gone through; to repeat again and again how surprised she had felt when the book was discovered in her drawer; until at length Alice could bear it no longer, and impatiently begged her to remember that, after all, no one had thought much about her, and Mrs Carter had scarcely taken the trouble to scold her. If she had been punished, it was certain that Ruth would have spoken long before. Janet was silenced for the time, and when she recommenced, Alice took refuge with Madeline and Mary Vernon.

But neither the trials of Madeline nor Alice, as regarded their companions, were to be of long continuance. By twelve o'clock everything was to be ready for departure. Alice was to go at the same time. She and Mary alone knew that Ruth and Madeline were not to return. The others looked upon the parting merely as the ordinary separation for the holidays. Alice's heart was already so heavy that this additional weight was less felt than it would otherwise have been. She did not then realise what school would be without her favourite companions; she was conscious that something was added to the shadow which already seemed cast over everything; but the holidays were come, and her return appeared far off, and she would not dwell upon it. Madeline had room in her heart but for one thought; Ruth would leave school in disgrace, and her mamma must know it. The delights of home were all marred by the idea, which, however, Madeline kept to herself, whilst brooding upon it and grieving over it, lest by speaking of it she should add to her sister's sorrow.

The good-conduct prizes were to be given the next day; but Alice had no regret for being absent, the prizes were nothing to

Digitized by Google

her now; and Madeline forgot that she was certain of one; and when Mrs Carter placed a book in her hand, and kissed her, and thanked her for the good example she had set, she laid it silently on the table, and cried.

'Is Miss Clifford nearly ready?' inquired Dawson, coming to the door of the bedroom as the clock in the hall struck half-past eleven.

Ruth was assisting Mary Vernon in packing her carpet-bag —that is, she appeared to assist, in reality she did nothing. She did not know what to take up, what to fetch; she brought the wrong things and carried them back, and then sat down to rest, looking round the room in despair of ever being ready; and at last fairly giving up, she threw her arms around Mary, and exclaimed, bitterly—

'O Mary! if it were not the last time! if I could come back! if Mrs Carter could see that I was sorry! Will papa consent? do you think he will?'

Mary shook her head.

'It would not be good for you, dearest Ruth. He said so last night.'

'Disgrace!' murmured Ruth; 'and they will talk of me and tell about it. Mary, are you sure you love me? Don't you despise me like the rest?'

'Despise you, Ruth! No; how could I? No one despises you.'

'But they look at me,' continued Ruth; 'and Madeline speaks differently even, and Alice; and what will mamma say?'

'Dearest Ruth, can you not think of these things differently —patiently, I mean; like a punishment? You know we are bound to bear punishment well. It would please your papa if you could; and, more than that, it would please God.'

Ruth's face assumed a calmer expression.

'Shame is my punishment,' she said, in a humble tone.

'And, it may be said, a blessing,' added Mary. 'Ruth, you may have had a warning now for your whole life.'

'Mamma!' repeated Ruth, in a tone of deep anguish.

Mary looked at her with compassion.

'I shall hear from you,' said Ruth, making an effort to change the current of her thoughts; 'and perhaps you will come and stay with us. Papa said he would ask you.'

'Yes, indeed, I will come if I may, and we will write constantly, and Alice will return to tell what is going on here; and

Digitized by Google

I am to have a letter from Mrs Carter when she has time. Dear Ruth, we must be friends all our lives.'

'Friends, if I deserve it,' said Ruth, in an under-voice, and she turned away, unable to utter another word.

'Five packages, three boxes, and two bags; is that all?' inquired Mr Clifford.

He stood in the hall, striving to appear unconcerned. Mrs Carter was with him at the dining-room door. Ruth came slowly down the stairs, followed by Madeline and Mary.

'Alice! where is Alice?' inquired Mr Clifford.

'In the school-room, waiting, I believe,' said Mrs Carter. 'My children, you have no time to spare.'

Ruth remained in the hall hesitating. Madeline looked round for her.

'Dear Ruth, you must come,' she whispered.

Mary put one hand affectionately on Ruth's shoulder, and with the other opened the school-room door. Ruth stepped before her sister. There was a noise in the school-room; business going on, and parting words with Alice. Ruth cast around her a nervous, agitated glance. The memories of the eventful years of her school-life seemed crowded into that one moment;—the memories and the feelings they called forth—shame, regret, disappointed hopes, neglected opportunities—they were all there. Madeline went up to Alice and spoke. Jessie O'Neile heard her, and exclaimed—

'It is Ruth! they are going!'

A general rush followed to say good-bye to Ruth. Good-bye! a cordial, kind good-bye; one in which no bitterness nor reproach, no thoughts of pride nor of self-exaltation, were mingled. Janet Harding kept Ruth's hand fast in hers. She was afraid to express more than common feeling.

'In six weeks you will be here again, Ruth,' said little Jessie.

Alice forgot the injunction of secrecy. Her own heart grew heavy, and she exclaimed—

'No, Jessie, never! they are going for good.'

'Not to come back! Ruth, my own dear Ruth! Fanny, Janet, Florence, do you hear?' and Jessie caught Ruth's dress, and looked up in her face with an expression of wondering grief.

Ruth's lip quivered. She felt that in another moment her self-command would be gone.

Digitized by Google

'Kiss me, Janet,' said Madeline, who made no effort to restrain her sorrow. 'You will all write to us, and we shall so want to know. Florence, perhaps you will hear about poor Clara, as you live near; and will you tell us if you ever meet Justine; and about the prizes, and the new girls next half-year? But Alice will be able to tell that.'

Alice was sadly lonely at the thought.

'Maddy, I cannot bear you to go,' exclaimed Janet. 'Every one is going that I cared for.'

'But, Alice, you will be here after the holidays?' said Florence.

Alice could scarcely bear to answer yes. Yet there was one comfort; the hope that the next half-year might be happier and better than the last. The future!—Alice lived in the future. She was ever intending, and ever resolving. Her intentions satisfied her now; their fulfilment it remained for time to show.

Madeline drew Alice away; then paused at the door to take one more look. Ruth slowly followed, Jessie still clinging to her side. Janet Harding was standing between the two school-rooms, looking after them. Ruth heard her father's voice; but her heart was full with one sad, bitter thought. She withdrew herself suddenly from little Jessie, and turned to speak the last words to Janet.

'Janet, have you forgiven? are you quite sure? It was dreadfully wrong, and I am so very, very sorry.'

Janet gave the kiss of hearty forgiveness fondly, almost with a feeling that pardon was uncalled for. Ruth struggled vainly with her tears.

'Now Jessie, darling, good-bye! Write to me, won't you?'

Madeline and Alice returned to hasten her.

'Good-bye, once more, all of you.'

A last look! a last smile! and the door of the school-room closed after them, and they stood in the hall, but one more parting before them; it was the hardest of all; from Mrs Carter, her sister, and Mary. Ruth was thankful that it was short; thankful that she was spared a longer trial of the self-reproach which the blessing of the true, kind friend whom she had grieved, could not but cause her. And Madeline was thankful also; for Ruth, for her father, and, even more than all, for Mrs Carter; for the prayer that God would guard them through their future life was broken and inaudible. The last gaze at the old familiar walls was denied to Ruth. Her head was bowed down with

Digitized by Google

shame; her eyes were dimmed and scorched with tears. But Madeline looked with Alice from the window of the carriage, to watch Mary Vernon standing upon the steps, Mrs Carter and Miss Barnard behind her, and Dawson looking over the blinds; and when the carriage passed the gate, she still dwelt upon the outline of the home she had left, its projections, windows, chimneys, until at length—it was the final recollection which Madeline retained of Mrs Carter's house—her eye rested upon the half-opened window of the little dressing-room. Might it not have whispered to her in the peace of her own conscience, that prayer—humble, simple, earnest prayer—was to be the safeguard of her future life, even as it had been her protection amidst the temptations of a school?

PART III.

CHAPTER XXX.

THERE was a small but cheerful room on the south side of the old Manor House of Haseley. It looked out upon the quaint garden—the raised terrace with the summer-house at its extremity, the trim gravel walks bordered by flower-beds, and the circle of turf in the centre, in which all the different paths were made to terminate. Alice Lennox was seated at the open window of this room; but she saw with indifference the beauty of the bright summer morning. Though the flowers were brilliant and the trees full of foliage, and though the sky was deeply blue, softened by a few thin feathery clouds, and the fresh dew glittered in the sunshine which flickered upon the grass—all was as nothing to her. She did not seem to hear the songs of the birds, or notice the glancing of the butterflies; and the gardener, who was trimming the turf near the house, worked unweariedly with his smooth, sharp-cutting scythe, without once attracting her attention. She was not thinking of these things or caring for them; and soon she turned away to survey the comforts of her own apartment.

Lady Catharine Hyde had selected it especially for her, and fitted it up with all which she deemed most likely to promote her goodness and her happiness. Alice could not be insensible to the thought thus bestowed upon her. Books were there, her favourites—such as she would herself have chosen—and others of history, travels, English and foreign classics, with which it

Digitized by Google

was desirable she should be acquainted. A work-table, a flower-stand, a piano, a writing-case, a drawing-box also—it seemed that there was nothing further needed—nothing for occupation and interest, little even for affection, for, gazing upon Alice, as she suffered her glance to wander round the room, was the sweet, gentle, holy face of the mother whom she had so early lost, so long regretted. Alice's attention was fixed, as for an instant she dwelt upon it, and rising, she left her station by the window, and stood before it.

Her mother's picture! blessed and hallowed were its associations—beautiful and pure as a dream of heaven! Alice's eyes were dimmed by tears, and with a sudden impulse of right feeling and energy, she roused herself from the listlessness which was creeping over her, and with the exclamation, 'Yes, I must really try,' began to busy herself in arranging the furniture so as best to suit her convenience.

It was Alice's first day at home; but the Manor scarcely seemed to her like home. Her heart was at school, with her companions, her pursuits, the interests which for more than five years had been engrossing to her. Now she was to begin a new life; and what was it to be? Many times in the course of that morning did Alice leave her employment to ponder upon this question. At her age there are few who would not have done the same; for there are few upon whom care has so early pressed that they cannot recall a time when the world seemed a fairy land, life but one uninterrupted summer, when imagination provided for them wealth, and honour, and deep unchanging affection, and they found but one drawback to their vision of happiness—that it was not present, but to come; that the hour before them was dull and tame, and the future, which they might never reach, bright as a scene of enchantment. So it was then with Alice Lennox.

The book-shelves were soon put into disorder. Alice thought that she could arrange the volumes better, and they were taken down and laid upon the floor. The work-table occupied the position best fitted for the flower-stand; both were moved into the centre of the room. There were particular boxes, bags, small ornaments which she had collected at school; these were brought from her bedroom and distributed amongst the chairs. The chairs themselves were not placed as well as they might be, or as she fancied they might be, and they were twisted and turned, and at last left in confusion till the remainder of the

Digitized by Google

furniture should be settled. When all this was done, Alice grew weary and rather cross, and sat down to rest. Solitude was dull, and she thought of Ruth and Madeline Clifford. Lady Catharine had assured her they would be with her in the course of the day. But the morning was a busy time with them; probably they would not be able to come till the afternoon, and then, perhaps, not to stay. This was not like the constant companionship of school, and Alice sighed as her thoughts reverted to the scenes she had left, and again she drew her chair to the window, and sat down to indulge in a reverie and a day-dream.

We will give but one passing illustration of the nature of Alice's thoughts. The 'castles in the air' of a girl of sixteen, just set free from school, are not likely to be profitable to the world in general any more than to herself. Alice had not passed untainted through the ordeal of a school life. She had in her mind the usual romance of gaiety and admiration, of wealth and luxury. Her 'castle in the air' was, in other words, only the indulgence of her vanity; but she had not yet learned to examine her thoughts, and purify and subdue them; they were pleasant thoughts, and she was satisfied.

She imagined herself in a ball-room—large, brilliantly lighted, decked with evergreens and flowers; crowds of elegantly-dressed persons walking up and down, or seated upon benches watching the different parties who were about to begin dancing. Music was heard, but not loud enough to drown conversation. Alice could catch even the faintest whispers of her own fancy. She herself was in imagination one of the dancers, and amongst the most likely of all to attract notice. Elegant, graceful, clever, interesting—these were common words when applied to herself; and then ensued supposed conversations with her partners; a compliment, and an answer, and another compliment; light words, and sharp observations upon others; and soon, the dispersion of the company—the return home—the events of the next day—a party of pleasure, with the same persons anxious to be with her—the same consciousness of being admired. We will not follow her further.

'Alice,' said the grave authoritative voice of Lady Catharine Hyde, 'this is not the way to get on in the world; it is nearly one o'clock.'

Alice started, blushed, and began an excuse.

'Your room must not be left in this state, my dear. I shall expect to see it look very different before luncheon.'

Digitized by Google

The door closed with rather a hasty sound. Alice checked the exclamation which rose to her lips, and recommenced her work with a different spirit; not dreamy, but fretted into energy. The present was before her now, recalled, as if by a spell, by Lady Catharine's words. The gong sounded precisely as the church clock struck one. Alice placed the last set of books neatly on the shelf, and ran down-stairs. Lady Catharine was waiting for her in the dark, oak-panelled dining-room, standing at a round table at the upper end, upon which the luncheon was prepared.

'I shall hope to see you more orderly, by and by, my dear,' she said, as Alice took her seat. 'We are to lead a regular life now—not as it used to be when you were running wild in the holidays. I like you to be in the drawing-room five minutes before luncheon, and then we can come in together. What will you have? Some cold meat?'

'Only some bread and butter, thank you,' replied Alice; and she began to eat in silence.

'You are tired, my dear,' said Lady Catharine 'Marsham would have helped you, if you had asked her.'

'No, not tired at all, thank you,' answered Alice; and silence followed again.

'I shall like to talk to you about your studies to-morrow,' observed Lady Catharine, after a long pause. 'I shall wish to fix hours for your different pursuits. It will not do to give up the discipline of school all at once; and your friends, Ruth and Madeline, are very industrious.'

'They are not as old as I am,' remarked Alice.

'Not quite; but I think they are more forward. It struck me, from some observations I made in the summer, that Ruth was much better informed in English history than you are.'

'We read history every day with Mrs Carter,' replied Alice.

'Very probably; but I am afraid you were careless. I shall beg Mr Clifford to mark out a course of reading for you, such as he would give to his own children.'

Alice made no reply, but helped herself to some more bread; refusing, with a certain tone of pettishness, the cake which Lady Catharine offered—indeed pressed her to take.

'I am sure you must have fagged yourself,' began Lady Catharine again; 'your appetite is not half as good as it was yesterday: or have you a headache? You must tell me, my dear, directly you feel at all ill.'

Alice declared herself free from indisposition of every kind,

Digitized by Google

and, wishing to divert notice from herself, remarked that she was glad that it was settled for Mr Clifford's sister, Mrs Mordaunt, not to go back to India; and she supposed that her mother would live with her still.

Lady Catharine said that she believed that was the arrangement; and it certainly seemed the best. The Parsonage was too small to accommodate her comfortably.

'And Madeline and Ruth will keep their school-room,' observed Alice. 'They were to have given it up if Mrs Beresford had come back.'

Lady Catharine said pointedly, that a school-room was a very great comfort to them; they made so much use of it.

Alice foresaw a little good advice; and, to avoid it, wondered why neither Ruth nor Madeline had been to see her.

'They seldom pay visits in the morning, my dear, you know; so there is no occasion to wonder about it. They will be here presently, I have no doubt. We will wait for them till three, and if they do not come by that time, we must go out. And, remember, three will be our usual walking hour, till the weather becomes too warm. Finish your luncheon quickly, and then go and complete your work. I should like everything to be in order before your friends come.'

Alice began to eat more diligently than before, not raising her eyes from her plate. Lady Catharine showed no further desire for conversation; the luncheon concluded as it had begun, almost in silence, and then Alice once more retired to her own room.

Little remained to be done in arranging it; but Alice was not inclined to be industrious. After the lapse of about twenty minutes, Lady Catharine appeared again in the doorway.

'Alice, my dear, have you nearly finished? I see the Miss Cliffords coming down the avenue.'

Alice threw down a book which she had been—not reading, but idly looking through, and walked about the room, doing nothing in reality, though apparently very busy. Lady Catharine watched her for some seconds, and presently took from her hands a workbox, which had been moved three different times in the course of a few minutes, and putting it decidedly in the centre of the table, said, 'There, my dear, that will do; now go to something else.' A ring at the hall bell was just then heard. Lady Catharine looked annoyed. 'I am vexed your young friends should find you in such disorder; you are a sad dawdle, Alice. I wonder Mrs Carter was not more particular

Digitized by Google

with you; however'—— the end of the sentence was left in doubt; but Lady Catharine gave Alice a kiss and went away.

Alice did really exert herself then. She did not wish, any more than Lady Catharine, that the first impression of her room should be unfavourable. She contrived to hide the principal deficiencies whilst the servant was answering the door, and then she sat down in an easy attitude, as if it was quite natural to be there, and waited with some degree of impatience for the entrance of her friends.

Ruth and Madeline Clifford, now more than fifteen years of age, were but little altered in feature and general appearance from what they were at twelve. Ruth's thoughtful blue eye still told of a mind which naturally looked beyond the outer surface of all which she saw and heard; her mouth still spoke of energy and resolution; the turn of her head was not entirely free from hauteur. She had grown tall and slight; her manners were peculiarly quiet, and marked by a natural grace and refinement which no education could have given. And Madeline was still the bright-eyed, simple, true-hearted child; whose words were eager, and her laugh full of glee; whose colour came and went with every variation of her quick feelings; and who seemed to have no care, except that those she loved should be happy; and to be about to pass over the troubled sea of life with a light, buoyant, hopeful spirit, which trials could not overwhelm.

Madeline stepped before Ruth as they entered the morning-room. She threw her arms round Alice's neck, kissed her heartily, and smiled with unfeigned delight as she looked at the wonderful change which the apartment had undergone since she was last in it. Ruth's was a calmer greeting, though not less affectionate, and the first observation she made afterwards was one scarcely addressed to Alice. It was spoken as her eye caught the picture of Mrs Lennox.

"Yes, Alice, you can never think now that Lady Catharine does not love you.'

Alice withdrew her hand, which she had laid upon Ruth's shoulder, and with a gesture of impatience pushed aside the box in the centre of the table.

'Love me! oh, yes! every one says so; she loves me, of course; and it is very nice. I don't think any of the girls at Mrs Carter's would have a prettier room than this; do you think they would?'

'No, not any one, I am sure,' exclaimed Madeline: 'and as

Digitized by Google

for our school-room at the Parsonage, it is not in the least to be compared to it. But, Alice, you must come there and like it, notwithstanding; it will be charming to read and be together always.'

'Yes, if I am allowed,' replied Alice.

'But you will be. Lady Catharine told papa that she wished us to be the greatest friends in the world.'

Alice expected Ruth to second Madeline's words, but Ruth's manner was not quite satisfactory. She was examining a book on the table, and appeared not to have heard what passed; but Alice could not help thinking that she must have done so.

'And now, Alice, tell us something about school,' said Ruth, putting down the volume. 'Who will be going back next half-year?'

Alice enumerated the names. Many were those of personal strangers; but from time to time Alice had brought back descriptions which seemed to make them familiar acquaintances.

'Janet Harding stays another year,' she said; 'her mamma thinks her so wonderfully improved; and so she is in some things. She never quotes texts now, but she is awfully strict. Jessie O'Neile, you know, is gone home for good, because her papa is to live in Ireland; and Ellen Hastings is to be sent to another school because her papa is grown poor, and cannot afford to keep her at Mrs Carter's; and—let me see—Fanny—oh! she is to come back for another half-year to be finished; but she never will be finished, she is just as odd and blunt as ever.'

'And Harriet and Florence,' said Madeline; 'they are so old to be at school still!'

'They have left now,' answered Alice. 'Florence and I are great allies; she has much more in her than we used to give her credit for; and she is so good-natured.'

'Good-natured!' repeated Ruth; 'I can fancy that: but as for having anything in her besides the Parisian fashions, I don't believe it is possible.'

'She is to come here to stay, perhaps—at least I am to get her here if I can,' continued Alice; 'Harriet I don't care much for, she is dull undoubtedly; but Florence is up to anything.'

Ruth smiled, and said—

'That is not any great charm, Alice; she may be up to mischief.' Alice made no answer.

'I wish you did not like her,' said Madeline.

Digitized by Google

'Why?' and Alice turned round rather sharply.

'Because I don't, that is all; and I should like us to like the same person.'

Again Alice glanced at Ruth, as if expecting to receive a similar expression of interest from her; and again Ruth took no notice, and Alice sighed.

'And you are to be very regular, and study a great deal, I suppose, Alice?' inquired Ruth; 'you have books enough. I see you have the same edition of Racine that papa has given us; shall you read by yourself, or with Lady Catharine?'

'I don't know: I cannot tell anything yet,' replied Alice. 'I have done nothing to-day but put my room in order.'

'Papa means to talk to Lady Catharine about your taking a day at the school,' said Madeline; 'shall you like it?'

'Do you take one?' asked Alice, evading the question.

'Yes, for the little classes; and on Sundays, you know, we always go. Papa is a great deal at the school now, and has the elder girls at home, because of the confirmation.'

'We are to be confirmed,' said Ruth, gravely.

'And you will be, too, Alice,' observed Madeline.

Alice's cheek flushed with a sudden excitement.

'And I shall be, too! Who says so?'

'Lady Catharine; she and papa were talking about it last Sunday.'

Alice sat down quickly, and began to move the different articles on the table with an air of mingled nervousness and absence of mind. Madeline watched her attentively for a few seconds, and then going up to her, said, kindly, 'Alice, dear, something is the matter.'

'No, nothing;' but Alice went on as before, and still in silence.

Madeline looked at Ruth for an explanation.

'Have we vexed you?' said Ruth, affectionately. 'We wish you would tell us.'

Alice looked up sadly. 'You have not vexed me, Ruth; that is, it is not your doing; but I was thinking of things, I don't know what precisely—a great many things. She is so particular—she interferes.'

'She! Lady Catharine?' asked Madeline.

'Yes. It is very wrong to complain, I know; don't say that I talked about it; and she is very kind—she had this room

Digitized by Google

quite ready for me when I came home last night. I thought I was going to be happy then.'

'And are you not happy?' inquired Ruth, with evident sympathy.

'She interferes,' repeated Alice. 'You two cannot understand what I mean. Your papa and mamma are not after you always.'

'Was Lady Catharine with you all this morning?' inquired Madeline.

'Not with me, but looking after me. She knew just what I was about; and she said something because I was not in the drawing-room five minutes before luncheon; and directly afterwards she sent me up-stairs, and told me exactly what I was to do. It is the same sort of thing which used to go on in the holidays, only it seems worse now I am come home for good.'

'Perhaps Lady Catharine is particular now, to put you in the right way,' suggested Madeline.

'It is not the being particular; Mrs Carter was particular—it is the manner. But then it is wrong in me to care. I wish I did not feel it; I wish I was some one else; I wish'——

Alice's glance was involuntarily directed to her mother's picture; and she stopped, struggling to keep back her tears.

'Mamma will be like your own mamma, Alice, dear,' began Madeline; but Ruth interrupted her.

'No, Madeline; we must not say that; we must not put any one before Lady Catharine. And papa always declares that she does really love Alice dearly.'

'Well, then, Alice, by and by you will be accustomed to it, and then you will not mind,' said Madeline.

'Yes, but I shall; I cannot help it: and I am growing too old to be watched in that way; no one else is. Florence Trevelyan does just what she likes at home.'

Ruth's look of compassion changed, at this speech, into one of surprise.

'But surely, Alice, Florence Trevelyan is no specimen of the good of doing as one likes.'

'I don't know that,' replied Alice, speaking more cheerfully, but not without irritation; 'Florence Trevelyan has a great deal more sense, and principle too, than you give her credit for. Mrs Carter says she is very much improved.'

'Really!' exclaimed Ruth; 'I suppose by that she must be altered.'

Digitized by Google

'So you would not believe me,' observed Alice, with an air of pique.

'I would believe you in some things, a great many indeed; but about Florence—I think you are fond of her.'

'Perhaps I am; she is very fond of me,' replied Alice.

'And when persons are very fond of you, Alice, you always fancy them perfection.'

'Couleur de rose, as Justine le Vergnier used to say,' remarked Madeline.

A faint tinge of red flushed Ruth's cheek at this name, and she inquired hastily, 'Shall you walk this afternoon, Alice?'

'By and by, I believe. Do you know that Justine is gone out as a governess? I heard it just before I came away, from Signor Berretoni. We have never learned anything else scarcely about her since Monsieur left off teaching at Mrs Carter's. Mrs Carter has been extremely strict about her. One of the girls told me that Monsieur would have given anything to have had her amongst us again.'

Ruth became quite silent after this speech, and Madeline seemed conscious that the subject was a disagreeable one. After a little time, however, Ruth said, rather abruptly to Alice, 'Then Lady Catharine has not mentioned the confirmation to you, Alice.'

'No, how should she? there has been no time.'

'But she will, certainly,' continued Madeline; 'and it will be fixed for you to come to papa to be examined with us. You will not mind that, shall you?'

A slight restraint was visible in Alice's manner as she replied, 'Not the examination; I can answer questions; but there are some things—Ruth, are you going to be very good after you are confirmed?'

Ruth coloured crimson, and Madeline answered for her.

'Ruth is very good now; a great deal better than you can guess, Alice.'

Just then Marsham knocked at the door. She came up with a message.

'Lady Catharine was gone to prepare for her walk; she wished Miss Lennox to accompany her, and the Miss Cliffords could go with them to the Parsonage.'

'Only to the Parsonage!' repeated Alice. 'I thought we should have gone all together somewhere. And it is so hot for walking!'

Digitized by Google

She threw open the window wider, and declared there was not a breath of air, although at the same moment a soft breeze was fanning her cheek. Then she put a finishing stroke to the arrangement of the furniture, altered the order of the books, and again came back to the window.

'You will not dislike going out when you are dressed,' said Ruth.

Alice would not take the hint. Madeline offered to fetch her bonnet and scarf, but was told that no one except Marsham knew where to find them; and Alice still delayed, leaning her head out of the window, and sighing at the heat.

Marsham came again, with the information that Lady Catharine was waiting.

Alice's exclamation of impatience was accompanied by a complaint, that she was always worried and not allowed a moment's freedom; but this time neither Madeline nor Ruth sympathised with her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

'RUTH, are you very much interested in your book?' said Mr Clifford, as he came into the drawing-room at the Parsonage, that evening.

Ruth was alone. She laid down the volume, and answered, with a smile, 'Papa, that means I am to talk.'

'Well, perhaps it does. Why did you leave all the conversation to Madeline just now, when she was telling us of your visit to the Manor?'

'Madeline always knows what to say,' replied Ruth; 'and I do not.'

'But in this case there could have been no difficulty; it was merely a straightforward history of fact.'

Ruth paused, as if she did not quite agree. 'I don't think it is quite straightforward, papa; at least, the facts puzzle me: that is why I do not talk.'

'Because you do not understand your own feelings about Alice?' asked Mr Clifford, in a tone of doubtful inquiry.

Ruth laughed. 'Papa, you guess now just in the wonderful way you did when I was a little child. Do you think Alice is my friend?'

Digitized by Google

'Ah, Ruth! that is the secret; I was sure of it. You have been examining your feelings, and fretting yourself about them ever since your return.'

'I ought to be certain,' said Ruth. 'I have known Alice all my life nearly.'

'Known her in a degree—outwardly.'

'But we were at school together, papa; and girls at school know each other intimately.'

'That was some time ago, my dear Ruth; and a little time, at your age, will work great changes. Possibly, you may have been advancing in one direction, Alice in another. No wonder, then, that when you meet you do not thoroughly comprehend each other.'

'We have met during the holidays,' persisted Ruth.

'Yes, but at such seasons Alice did not, as it were, come in contact with you. She was more a visitor than a home companion; the trial of your friendship will be now.'

Ruth repeated the word 'friendship' in an under-tone; and, after a few moments' thought, said, 'Papa, I do not think I shall ever form a friendship for Alice;—not what I call friendship.'

Mr Clifford smiled. 'And your notion of friendship, Ruth, is—what?'

'Ah, papa! I know you will laugh. Old people—no, not old people, but grown-up people, always do, when girls talk of friendship.'

'No, indeed, my dear child,' and Mr Clifford became grave in an instant, 'I am the last person to laugh at anything involving such serious consequences. I merely smiled at the recollection of some romantic absurdities I have heard upon the subject; but they are not likely to be yours, Ruth; so tell me, what is your idea of friendship?'

'I don't think I can explain; I don't think I quite know myself—that is, I can feel it, but I cannot put it into words. Mamma would be like a friend, only she is so much older, and so much better, and she is "mamma."'

'And Miss Vernon, what of her?'

'Mary Vernon; yes, she would be a real friend; but she is so far away, and she is going to be married; I never have anything to do with her except by letters; and that is not satisfactory, though I like having her letters excessively.'

'And Madeline?'

Digitized by Google

'O papa! Madeline is myself; there is no one in all the world like Madeline—no one could be. She is not my friend at all.'

'Only your sister,' said Mr Clifford, with a half smile, which changed into an expression of fond interest, as Madeline, following her mother into the room, and drawing a footstool to the side of Ruth's chair, leaned her head upon her lap, and whispered—

'Now, go on talking; I always like to hear you and papa talk.'

Ruth smoothed the fair hair which clustered round her sister's face, and imprinted a kiss upon her forehead, and then turning to her mother, said, 'Mamma, it is you who must explain; you always understand. What do I mean by a friend?'

'And why cannot Alice Lennox be Ruth's friend?' continued Mr Clifford.

'We should have reached that point, only we were obliged to define friendship first of all.'

'Ruth's notion of friendship is of a high, pure feeling,' replied Mrs Clifford; 'respect as well as love.'

'Yes, mamma, yes, exactly; that is just it: and I don't think I can respect Alice. She is very good-natured, I would not be unkind, I do like her very much, but sometimes—Maddy, you know'——

'Alice wishes to do right,' said Madeline, sitting upright, and speaking energetically.

'Wishes! but she does not do it; she never did, that I can remember. It was the same at school; she was always wishing.'

'Which is at least one point in her favour,' said Mrs Clifford, gently.

'Yes; but dear mamma, it is so tiresome to be with persons who do nothing but wish. It used to provoke me at school to hear Alice complaining of herself, and then to see her idle away her time just as much as ever.'

'Patience! Ruth,' said Mr Clifford; 'we need it ourselves.'

'Yes, papa, of course; but for a friend, patience does not seem the right thing. One would like some one to make one better.'

Mrs Clifford turned to Madeline. 'What do you say, Madeline, my love; is not Alice your friend either?'

'I don't know, mamma; I never think whether she is or not. She is different from other people, more like a relation.'

Digitized by Google

'But it is not a matter of course to like one's relations,' observed Ruth, quickly.

And Alice is cast off, then,' said Mr Clifford. There was melancholy in the tone of his voice, which Ruth perceived.

'Papa, do you think I am wrong?' she asked.

'It would be hard to say that, my dear. I should be very sorry for you to have low ideas of friendship; yet I feel for Alice, she is so lonely.'

'But, papa, surely you would not wish me to care for any one who has not right principles?'

'There are different degrees in what you term caring, my dear Ruth. For your own sake I may be quite contented that you feel as you do.'

'But Ruth would make her good,' exclaimed Madeline; 'because she makes every one good.'

Ruth's eyes sparkled brightly for an instant.

Mr Clifford watched her attentively. 'It is as well, perhaps, that things should be as they are,' he said, after a short silence. 'It is a great trial for us all to be constantly and affectionately associated with those we cannot thoroughly respect. Ten years hence, Ruth, we may hope that you will be able to take an interest in such persons, without injury to yourself.'

'Alice will be different after she is confirmed,' observed Madeline.

'No, my dear Madeline,' said Mr Clifford; 'Alice will not be different after her confirmation, unless she is different before it. Confirmation is what the word implies, a fixing or strengthening; but there must be a principle first of all to be fixed.'

'Alice had a right principle given her once,' said Madeline.

'Undoubtedly; but it may have been weakened, or, to speak more truly, the Holy Spirit may have been resisted.'

'That has been the case with us all,' said Madeline.

'In a measure, my love, at times; but there is a vast difference between persons who seem to live very much the same kind of lives. It is a difference in the will—not the wish merely, but the will; and it is the latter which is strengthened at confirmation. Almost all the young people who intend to come before the bishop, *wish* by and by to be good; but I am afraid there are comparatively very few who really *will* it.'

Digitized by Google

Madeline turned to her mamma, who was standing by her, listening to the conversation, and, in an under-voice, said, 'Mamma, do you think I have the will?'

Mrs Clifford's quiet answer, 'I trust so, my child,' might have appeared cold to some; but it was the smile, the look of contentment and hope which Madeline required, and which satisfied her.

Ruth was leaning back in her chair whilst this conversation was passing, seemingly engrossed in her own thoughts. Mr Clifford sat down by her, and took up a book. Mrs Clifford prepared the tea, and Madeline went to fetch her work for the evening. Still Ruth was silent; and when at length she was awakened from her fit of abstraction by Madeline's offering her some bread and butter, she did not tell what she had been thinking about. After the tea-things were removed, Mr Clifford went to his study, and Ruth prepared as usual to read aloud. Perhaps she was sleepy—perhaps the book was not interesting. Certainly she did not seem to take much interest in it, and made many mistakes. Mrs Clifford proposed music towards the close of the evening, and Ruth was sent to the study to know if her papa could come in.

'Not to-night, my dear,' replied Mr Clifford, as she delivered her message.

He did not raise his eyes from his writing. Ruth lingered in the doorway.

'Presently, papa—please do. It is much more pleasant to play when you are there.

'O Ruth! is it you?' and Mr Clifford looked up. 'I fancied it was Madeline. No, I am afraid I cannot possibly come to-night; I have not half finished my sermon.'

'But there will be time to-morrow, dear papa. I wish you would.'

Ruth advanced to enforce her petition by a kiss.

'It is a confirmation sermon, Ruth; I must not write it in a hurry.'

'It is always the confirmation now,' began Ruth; but she stopped and coloured.

'Would you have it anything else, my dear child?'

'No, papa, of course not. I know it must be; but when it is over I think I shall be glad.'

'And we may hope you will have reason to be so,' answered Mr Clifford, very gravely.

Digitized by Google

Ruth's reply was in an altered tone. 'Papa, I wish I never thought of serious things lightly.'

'Never speak of them lightly, my dear, that is the first step; and confirmation is of such great importance—a moment's thought upon the subject would always check you.' Mr Clifford took up his pen; but still Ruth did not offer to go.

'Papa,' she said, after some hesitation, 'do you really think I could be of any use to Alice?'

Mr Clifford smiled, but it was not quite a smile of satisfaction. 'I do not know, my dear. I would rather you should not think about it.'

'I should like to do her good,' continued Ruth; 'Madeline believes I could.'

Mr Clifford pushed aside his writing as he replied, 'My dear Ruth, we do good to others by doing good to ourselves. You, of all people, must remember this.'

'Because I am proud,' said Ruth; and the colour deepened on her cheek.

'Yes; because you are naturally proud, and have a great desire of influence and power. If this temptation is ever to be subdued, the struggle must begin at once.'

'And I must not think about Alice, then?' said Ruth.

'Think about her in setting a good example, trying to make her happy, and giving her an interest in your pursuits; but leave the result. Alice is in far wiser hands than either yours or mine.

'I do not think I quite understand,' said Ruth.

'It is the difference,' replied Mr Clifford, 'between making it your chief business to induce her to do her duty, or to induce yourself to do your own There are persons who are called upon to lead others—clergymen, parents, masters and mistresses of families, and teachers. You are not placed in any such responsible situation. At your age there is but one thing to be attended to—your own heart.'

Ruth stood in silent thought for a few moments. At length she said, 'It is so hard to know about one's own heart. I do a great many bad things; but I cannot always feel sorry. Madeline is always sorry.'

'Madeline is blest with a tender conscience,' replied Mr Clifford; 'but she has her difficulties as well as you, my dear Ruth. Still it is, I own, very sad to know that we ought to feel our sins, and yet not to do so.'

Digitized by Google

'I cannot make myself feel,' said Ruth.

'But you can pray, my dear child. Do you remember the collect for Ash-Wednesday? It is particularly applicable to persons who desire to be penitent, and yet are conscious that they are not so; and, besides, you can practise yourself in self-examination—that is, not merely looking into your own heart, but into the law of God. The first step in the knowledge of what we are, is the sense of what we ought to be.'

'Perfect!' said Ruth, in a tone of much seriousness.

'Yes; perfect, even as our Father which is in heaven is perfect.'

'But it is impossible to be so now,' said Ruth.

'Impossible in actual practice; but not impossible in the will and endeavour.'

'Only, if we can never succeed,' continued Ruth, with some hesitation, 'why should we attempt it?'

'I will answer your question by what is called analogy,' replied Mr Clifford. 'When a great artist sits down to draw, what is his object?'

'To do the best,' replied Ruth.

'Yes, the best possible, without imperfection; and yet he is straining after that which he can never reach. So when a man devotes himself to science, his wish is to know all things connected with it. But the works of God are infinite: it is not in his nature to understand them; yet who blames him for trying to do so? It is only in religion, Ruth, that we are contented with anything short of perfection.'

Ruth replied that she did not think she was contented.

'I suspect you are more so than you imagine,' observed her father: 'and, my love, since we are talking upon the subject, I would ask you, whenever you are inclined to dwell upon the hope of doing good to others, to end by thinking how perfect you ought to be yourself.'

'I do think about it very often,' replied Ruth.

'Yet think about it still more; carry out the idea into details. Try, for instance, to understand in little minute particulars, what is involved in the two great duties of love to God and love of your neighbour; all which tends to keep up a high standard of goodness is especially necessary for you, more peculiarly now, as a preparation for confirmation, when you are about to renew a sacred promise.'

Digitized by Google

'I can never quite understand why it is right to promise so much,' said Ruth, 'since no one can perform it.'

'When you are older, my love, and have thought more deeply, you will comprehend better that it would be inconsistent with the perfection of God to allow any promise to be made to Him that is not complete. But I think, even now, you will see that we act in the same way ourselves. A wife vows perfect obedience to her husband; a subject swears to be entirely loyal to his sovereign. No one says in these instances, "I am not perfect, and I will only engage to keep a part of the vow;" but all right-minded persons promise—that is, they own to having the will, and that will is accepted. If this is the case with our fellow-creatures, much more may we hope it will be with our merciful God.'

'I think I have the will,' said Ruth.

'I trust you have, my dear; yet I should be glad to know you had thought a good deal about it. We can only know ourselves by self-examination; comparing our conduct with the requirements of God. When we see our duties, we see our faults. I wish you would spend some little time, as I said, in imagining what your every-day conduct would be—how it would differ from what it is at present—if you were fully to perform those two duties, love to God and to your neighbour. I think it would be of use to you—of more use'—and Mr Clifford smiled gravely—'than trying to do good to Alice.'

Ruth's face was, for an instant, clouded. 'I should like to do good to myself and Alice too,' she said.

'But, my love, trust me, till you have fulfilled the first task thoroughly, you will never be fit for the second.'

The truth of this assertion Ruth would not dispute, and she left the room.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SOME days afterwards Lady Catharine and Alice were breakfasting together at the Manor at eight o'clock. The room they occupied was that in which Alice, in by-gone days, used to spend her pleasant Sundays. It was a south room, immediately under Alice's own apartment, and it had been re-touched—it could scarcely be called re-furnished—within the

Digitized by Google

last few months. Some old-fashioned chairs had been removed, and a cumbrous cabinet; and there was a new bookcase occupying the lower end. Similar changes had taken place in many parts of the home — only in one respect there was no alteration. The closed rooms were still closed, and more carefully than before; they were never now unlocked except at stated periods. Alice saw, but she could not appreciate the changes made. There are some minds which instinctively cling to early attachments and acquired habits, with a tenacity which makes it a positive pain to break from them even in trifles. Such was Lady Catharine Hyde's. The sight of every object in its accustomed place, the punctual recurrence of the same duties at the same hours, were necessary to her. It might not have been desirable that such things should be of importance; but the error, if it can be called such, had been increased, if not actually occasioned, by the circumstances in which she had been placed. Left in loneliness and great sorrow at an early period of life, Lady Catharine had been thrown back upon herself, her own resources, her own wishes. Excessive precision and punctuality became a business to her. They gave her something to think of and to do; they were motives for exertion; and in themselves, when not carried to excess (and there was no excess when she first began rigorously to practise them), they were undoubtedly useful. It was natural that one who moved so little in society, should learn to expect her will in such cases to be a law. Lady Catharine Hyde hardly knew what it was to be disobeyed, and she was never led to imagine, by anything she saw or heard, that her peculiar habits and fancies could be burdensome to other persons. She believed that her mode of life was calculated, by its quietness and order, to render Alice good and happy; and, feeling herself surrounded by all that was needful for her own comfort, it was not easy to imagine what more a young girl could require. And yet Lady Catharine did think much, whether by any alteration she could give Alice pleasure. Although it did not suit her to ask the opinion of any other person upon the subject, she did the very best, according to her own judgment. The arrangement of Alice's room cost her much thought, and this was, in a measure, valued; but the changes in other parts of the house, which to Lady Catharine were of much consequence, were almost unheeded by Alice. So it was in many ways: that which to Lady Catharine was a

Digitized by Google

considerable effort, even an annoyance, was taken as a matter of course by Alice. Lady Catharine was peculiarly unselfish. Alice was bent upon her own gratification; and yet, when Alice made her complaint to Madeline and Ruth, a stranger might have supposed that she was suffering under constant domestic tyranny, and this without any actual exaggeration of the facts.

'My dear,' said Lady Catharine, on this morning, as Alice sat down to the breakfast table, and began to pour some hot milk into the small, deep cups of oriental china, which Lady Catharine had never been prevailed upon to exchange for modern breakfast cups: 'you were rather after your time this morning; did Marsham call you properly?'

'The prayer bell had only just rung when I came down,' replied Alice.

'I beg your pardon, my dear; I waited at least seven minutes; I reckoned by my watch. Don't let it happen again.'

'No, ma'am.'

'And, Alice, one thing I wanted to say to you particularly; you manage to keep Barnes late with the letters—I saw him actually running to the post-office yesterday.'

Alice could not refrain from a smile as she thought of any one belonging to Lady Catharine's household committing the grave offence of running in the village.

'The post goes out earlier than it did,' she replied.

'Yes; but that ought to make no difference to you; you ought to be ready in time, for you have the whole morning to yourself.'

'I had several letters to write yesterday,' continued Alice.

Lady Catharine looked annoyed.

'My dear, I wish you could learn to take reproof better; it really seems as if you could never be in the wrong.'

Alice was silent. Lady Catharine was beginning to notice her silence. She pondered upon it in her own mind, wondering what the cause could be, and then went on—

'What makes you write so many letters, my dear?'

'They are to my schoolfellows,' replied Alice. 'I promised I would write.'

'To some, certainly you may.'

Alice raised her head for an instant in surprise; then began sipping her coffee quickly.

Digitized by Google

She had never realised the notion of Lady Catharine's interfering with her correspondence.

'We shall see, my dear,' continued Lady Catharine in a voice which she meant to be peculiarly encouraging; 'perhaps I may not object; you shall show me some of their answers.'

Alice grew rather uncomfortable. She had a most unpleasant recollection of a habit of Florence Trevelyan's of calling Lady Catharine 'Juno.'

'Is Miss Vernon one of your correspondents?' inquired Lady Catharine. 'I should have no objection to her.'

'She is Ruth's friend,' answered Alice; 'she has left school a long time.'

'Oh, yes; I remember now. But tell me, my dear—I really want to know—what are the names of your friends?'

'I write to Jessie O'Neile sometimes,' answered Alice, desirous to put forward the acquaintance which was the least likely to be found fault with.

'Miss O'Neile: that is one. And whom besides?'

'Last holidays I wrote to Fanny Wilson,' continued Alice.

'Miss O'Neile and Miss Wilson. I have heard them mentioned. I can inquire about them through Mrs Carter. Well?'

'And sometimes—I have not written often'——

Lady Catharine's eye was fixed upon Alice, and the name was uttered hurriedly.

'Sometimes I write to Florence Trevelyan.'

'Oh! Trevelyan!'

To Alice's surprise Lady Catharine's face quite brightened at the name.

'I know something of them—the Trevelyans of Cromer Court. Mrs Carter told me that two of the daughters were with her. An aunt of theirs, Mrs De Lacy, has lately come into this neighbourhood. I am sorry you are not more intimate.'

Alice was upon the point of saying that she was very intimate, but she could not openly and at once contradict herself.

'I will inquire about the others you named,' pursued Lady Catharine, with unusual animation. 'I shall like you to have friends of your own age; and if these young ladies are desirable companions, you can ask them to come and stay with you by and by.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' replied Alice, coldly. She did not feel ungrateful, but she was provoked with herself. If she had

Digitized by Google

only spoken out boldly, Florence Trevelyan might have been invited almost immediately.

Lady Catharine had made what for her was a great advance towards sympathy, and was vexed at Alice's apparent shyness. Still she made another attempt to overcome it.

'You can tell me, I daresay, my dear, what Miss O'Neile and Miss Wilson are like. What age are they?'

Alice told, and made a few general observations on their appearance and dispositions.

'Miss Trevelyan must be older, I imagine, from what Mrs Carter said,' observed Lady Catharine.

Alice answered that Florence was nearly seventeen.

'And she has a sister?'

'Yes, ma'am, one.'

The answer was short, for Alice particularly disliked talking about Florence Trevelyan just then.

'Ah! then, I suppose that is the reason you did not get on with her as well as with the others; she must have been too old.'

Alice was becoming vexed at what she felt to be her own disagreeable manner. It was unusual for Lady Catharine to ask so many questions, and under other circumstances Alice would have been softened by the interest shown into being communicative. Now she could only think how stupid she had been herself in not saying that Florence Trevelyan was her friend; and how provoking it was in Lady Catharine so to interpret her few words as to decide that they were not of an age to suit each other.

'Well! if Miss Trevelyan should come into the neighbourhood to visit her aunt, I shall hope to become acquainted with her,' continued Lady Catharine.

Alice said, with an air of indifference, she hoped that Florence would come; and then the conversation was stopped, for the butler came in with the letters. Three were laid before Lady Catharine, one before Alice; Lady Catharine was immediately engrossed in her correspondence, and Alice opened a letter from Florence Trevelyan with some degree of trepidation as to the style of its contents.

But there was not any great reason to be uncomfortable. Florence Trevelyan had not remained so long under Mrs Carter's care without deriving benefit.

She was, as Alice had said, improved; her very moderate

Digitized by Google

abilities had been made the most of; and her manners and habits refined. When with sensible judicious companions, she could be apparently sensible and judicious too; or at least not remarkably the reverse. She was what is called very passable in society; lady-like and tolerably accomplished; with sufficient information to enable her to enter upon the ordinary topics of the day without committing any great blunders.

On more important points she was altered much in the same degree. Increasing age had given her increasing steadiness; her position in the school, which naturally was raised as time passed on, made her more watchful over others, and more guarded in her own conduct. Though she often talked foolishly and loved dress, and gave way to vanity, it was in a quiet way which people in general were not likely to remark; and which even Mrs Carter sometimes failed to discover. Florence Trevelyan, when she left school, was like hundreds of her age and sex who have received the ordinary advantages of education. The usual remark made upon her was, that she was a nice, lady-like girl, and more agreeable than Harriet, whose temper was not so good, and whose manners were not so lively. Her letter was a transcript of her mind; smooth and well-sounding, with nothing in it; the handwriting pointed and delicate enough to pass current as a lady's, but not giving any indication of character.

The first part of the letter was written from her home. It mentioned the weather and the state of the roads, her mamma's health, and the arrival of her brothers from school. Also the fact that she had received a present from an uncle, and had been invited to a young party. The postscript, written on a loose half-sheet, was, however, dated differently. It was from Sheldon, a village about three miles from Laneton. Florence was staying there with her aunt. She wrote in great delight, and with most warm expressions. The near vicinity to Laneton had brought out all her real or supposed affection for Alice. It was now, 'My dearest Alice;' nothing could be more charming than the prospect of their meeting; Mrs De Lacy was enchanted also. They would be together constantly. In fact, the chief object of Florence's visit to the neighbourhood was, she said, the prospect of seeing her 'darling Alice.' At the conclusion, Alice was reminded that she had not kept to her promise of writing every week; and it was hinted, in terms of

Digitized by Google

gentle reproach, that she seemed likely to be the first to break the vow they had made of lasting friendship.

The letter was a very fair letter; there was really nothing objectionable in it: no mention of 'Juno:' but it perplexed Alice extremely. The idea of lasting friendship and correspondence every week was not at all compatible with her profession of writing but seldom, and her air of indifference; and they were just the points which Lady Catharine was likely to notice.

'Well! my dear!' said Lady Catharine, laying down her letter, and looking at Alice as if expecting to receive something. Alice held Florence's letter under the table. 'You have heard from some one, surely, my dear?'

'Yes, ma'am.' Alice hesitated; then, what she considered a bright thought—alas! should we not rather call all thoughts but those of simple truth most dark and evil ones—struck her. She placed the letter before Lady Catharine, and crushing the postscript together, managed to put it into her pocket.

'A very tolerable letter this,' said Lady Catharine, as she finished reading it. 'Very fairly expressed; neatly written; not much in it, certainly; but still, as you are only commonly intimate, I suppose there is not much to be said. I daresay you will be in no great hurry to answer it. Young ladies seldom care to give up much of their time except to their particular friends. Which do you like best, Alice—Miss Wilson or Miss O'Neile?'

Alice did not know; she was equally indifferent to both.

'Put the letter by carefully,' continued Lady Catharine. 'You should have a place in your desk for answered letters and unanswered letters. Or, stay, I will give you a little case for them, marked. You will like that, my dear?'

There was sometimes a tone in Lady Catharine's 'my dear,' which touched Alice deeply. It spoke of such real kindness, such hearty interest;—it was one of the few signs of her deep affection which almost unknowingly escaped her. Now it sounded in Alice's ear as a reproach for a slight deception, the result of a want of moral courage; for words true in the letter, but not in the spirit. Alice had not written often to Florence; but she had promised that she would do so. She said, 'Thank you,' for Lady Catharine's offer of a case for her letters, but it was not hearty gratitude, and Lady Catharine was once more chilled. A last attempt was made for conversation Lady Catharine mentioned the confirmation. She spoke of it very

Digitized by Google

seriously, and with considerable tenderness towards Alice. She did not indeed inquire whether Alice was desirous of being confirmed; that was taken as a matter of course; but she expressed most warm interest in her welfare, and begged that if difficulties should arise in her mind, they might be brought before her without reserve. Then she said, 'You are very silent, my love; have you any objection to being confirmed?'

Poor Alice! she would have suffered severe bodily pain to avoid answering that question; for how much was involved in it!

Confirmation was a very important rite, Lady Catharine had said. Yes; Alice knew well that. She knew the deep meaning of her baptismal vows; she knew the trial implied in the solemn engagements to renounce the works of the devil and the vanities of the world; to believe the articles of the Christian faith, and to keep the commandments of God through the course, of—it might be—a long life. Alice was not ignorant of her responsibilities. She understood them too well for her own peace of mind; for conscience whispered, in answer to Lady Catharine's question, that she was not willing to undertake them; that she would fain live a little longer to the world and to herself; that she would indulge her vanity, and follow the bent of her own self-will for a little while, and then—but Alice did not think deliberately of the future. She took it for granted that she should be good some day or other, in some way or other. She supposed that religion would come to her by and by, as a matter of course. Lady Catharine was religious, so was Mrs Carter, so were Mr and Mrs Clifford. Their right principles seemed to be always at hand, and Alice could not see why at last it should not be the same with her. To be religious without effort was her desire. Confirmation implied an effort—a resolution. Alice was no hypocrite. She did not desire to make the effort, therefore she did not desire to be confirmed. Yet, in answer to Lady Catharine's inquiry, she said that she had no objection.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

'YOU must wish mamma many happy returns of the day, Alice: it is her birthday.'

This was Madeline's first speech to Alice on the thirtieth of

Digitized by Google

June. They were to spend the day together at the Parsonage. Alice's countenance was a great contrast to Madeline's on this morning. Madeline was the picture of light-heartedness; Alice was evidently discomposed. She returned Madeline's greeting, and inquired for Ruth.

'Oh, Ruth is with papa at the school, arranging the books. It is a holiday, and so they are very busy putting everything in order.'

'I should have thought Ruth would have had a holiday too, on her mamma's birthday,' remarked Alice.

'It is a holiday, in fact, for her; she likes being at the school very much, for she is always glad to help papa; and I have been with mamma in the store-room. Ruth thought she should be back by the time you came.'

'I imagined I should have found her here,' said Alice, in a tone of vexation.

Madeline could not help perceiving Alice's manner, and began to think it would have been better for her to have remained at the Manor, if she was not inclined to be pleased. She proposed that Alice should go up-stairs to take off her bonnet, and Alice agreed, though still in the same moody way. Madeline went to speak to her mamma, and during her absence Alice occupied herself in looking at the books that were on the table. They were a Bible and Prayer Book; one or two upon confirmation and the Holy Communion, and others of a serious kind. A school register also was there, and with it were some little books for school rewards. Alice took them up and put them down with an air of disgust. Then she sighed, and returned to them again. They excited apparently disagreeable thoughts, yet still they engaged her attention.

It was some little time before Madeline came back, and when she did, it was only to make an apology, and beg Alice to go down-stairs into the school-room alone for a few minutes. She would be with her as soon as possible, but she wished to do something for her mamma first.

Alice did not attend to Madeline's request; and as soon as the door closed, she sat down and recommenced her examination of the book. One was a volume of sacred poetry; the names of both Ruth and Madeline were written in it, and it was full of pencil marks. Alice saw that it was much read, and therefore she supposed much liked; but why it should be was a mystery to her. It was not what she called pretty poetry; the

Digitized by Google

lines did not all flow easily, they did not catch the ear at the first sound; and there was some difficulty in reaching the meaning. Alice read over some verses several times before she could entirely understand them. Still, the book interested her. She liked to guess why the marked passages were preferred; to try and find out which were Ruth's favourites and which Madeline's. Insensibly she began to apply some to herself, if not as the expression of her own feelings, at least as saying what she would wish to feel; and whilst she did this, she forgot her own cares, her self-will, and vanity, and discontent, and dwelt, as it were, in another and a better world.

And Alice knew that better world to be also the true world. When she read of heaven and eternity, angels and saints, and of Him, the Lord of all, who had redeemed her, she knew that she was reading of realities which must endure for ever. A quieter, more solemn feeling stole over her; bitterness was mixed with it, but she did not strive, as before, to escape from it. Minutes went by quickly, and at length Alice was roused from her occupation by the voice of Ruth, who said, as she peeped over her shoulder—

'I am glad you are looking at that—don't you like it excessively?'

Alice closed the volume instantly. 'How long you have been, Ruth! I have been waiting here such a time!'

'It was rather naughty of me,' said Ruth, playfully; 'but I could not help it; papa and I were so busy. And, you know, I could not make a stranger of you. But where is Madeline?'

'She went away to your mamma.'

'And left you here alone? Really, she ought not to have done that; I quite depended on her taking care of you.'

'Madeline did what she could,' replied Alice, 'and she begged me to go down-stairs; only I preferred staying here.'

'There is not much to amuse you here,' said Ruth, looking round the room. 'You are not very fond of grave books, Alice?'

'Yes, I am, sometimes—some books—I like this one,' she added, with a slight hesitation, pointing to the small volume which she had been reading.

Ruth took up the book, and turned over the pages, 'Yes, she said, thoughtfully, 'if one were only as good as this would make one! I wish'——

Digitized by Google

But Alice interrupted her with a question: 'What are we going to do to-day, Ruth?'

Ruth looked a little startled at her abruptness, but mentioned several plans; amongst them a walk to a neighbouring village, to see a new church which was building there; or, if they chose, to call on a friend who lived at a distance beyond, and to take the pony with them, and ride in turn. Alice did not seem to take a particular interest in any suggestion, but Ruth went on planning most good-naturedly. Presently, Alice said—

'That church at Redford is not far from Mrs De Lacy's, is it?'

'No,' replied Ruth; 'but what makes you ask?'

'Mrs De Lacy is Florence Trevelyan's aunt,' said Alice.

'Is she indeed? I never heard so before.'

'She is her aunt,' repeated Alice; 'and,' she added, after an instant's pause, 'Florence is coming; she is come—perhaps she may be there.'

'I should rather like to see her again,' observed Ruth, carelessly. 'Did you say she was come, or coming?'

'Coming — come, I think;—yes, I believe she is there,' replied Alice.

'And I suppose you will ask Lady Catharine to take you over to see her,' said Ruth, 'since you are such great allies.'

'O Ruth!' Alice stopped and coloured.

'O Ruth! what?' repeated Ruth, laughing; then, seeing that Alice appeared really uncomfortable, she added, 'is there any harm in saying you are great allies?'

'I would rather you should not say so before Lady Catharine,' answered Alice, more boldly.

'What? she will think "allies" not quite a young lady's word.'

'No; nonsense, she is not so particular as that; but, Ruth, I am afraid to say things to you, I am afraid you will not understand them.'

Ruth drew up her head. 'Certainly, if you think that, Alice, you had better keep your secrets to yourself.' She turned aside and said no more.

Alice regarded her attentively without appearing irritated. On the contrary, there was an expression of interest and respect in her face. Ruth went to the dressing-table, and taking off her bonnet, began to arrange her hair. Madeline at this moment came in to fetch a little parcel of work for a poor woman, and

Digitized by Google

going up to Ruth, put her arm affectionately round her, and said: 'Are you tired, dear? can I help you?' It was a very natural, simple question, but it was put so tenderly and unselfishly, that it struck Alice peculiarly. And Ruth's manner in return—the confidence, the sense of hearty sympathy, made her feel, as she often did now, envious. She sighed when Madeline left the room, and said: 'I wish I had a sister.'

'Every one may well wish that who has not one,' answered Ruth; but the words were regretted as soon as they were uttered, for Alice's face grew sad. 'I mean a sister is a great blessing,' continued Ruth; 'but other people have friends, and that does for them, I suppose.'

'Some persons have friends,' observed Alice; 'not all.'

'You have a friend,' continued Ruth—'Florence Trevelyan.'

'No, indeed; a friend!—she is not a friend—she is not what I mean. I like her, but she is not my friend.'

'I thought you were great allies,' answered Ruth, with a slight accent of contempt, which did not reach Alice's ears.

'Allies are not friends,' answered Alice.

Ruth turned round quickly, and her face showed both pleasure and astonishment.

'Then you have notions of something good in a friend, Alice,' she said.

'Good? yes, very good indeed! a great, great deal better than myself; but no one who is good will ever be my friend.'

Alice's manner when she said this excited Ruth's compassion, and overcame her prudence.

'I wish you had a friend at the Manor,' she replied, 'in Lady Catharine.'

Alice twisted her chain according to her old school trick, and did not instantly answer. Presently she broke forth with: 'It is enough to make any one angry, to be treated so—just like a child!—ordered about—lectured from morning till night.'

Ruth could scarcely refrain from a smile at this incoherent indignation.

'But what is the matter?—what is it all?' she inquired.

'The old story; but I can't bear it—I won't—she does not care for me in the least.'

'Alice, you are wrong there,' replied Ruth, gravely; 'though you are vexed, you ought not to be unjust.'

'I have been lectured this morning like a baby,' continued Alice. 'She says that I waste my time, and that I r- ist,

Digitized by Google

whether I like it or not, go to the school; and I am to take a list of my books, and an inventory of all my things, and I don't know what. It is ten times worse than school; there one expected it, but this is home.'

'But, Alice,' said Ruth, persuasively, 'just think for one minute, there is nothing very dreadful in having to go to the school, or to take a list of books. Papa and mamma make us do so.'

'Do they?' answered Alice, more calmly; 'but you are different from me—you don't dislike it.'

'Madeline does,' said Ruth: 'she hears a little class every Thursday morning, who can only just tell their letters; but she never complains, though she dislikes it extremely.'

'Madeline is good,' said Alice; 'I never shall be.'

A sigh followed this speech. Ruth was interested by it. Alice's state of mind appeared strange to her.

'Madeline is good,' she replied; 'but I don't see why you are not to be equally so.'

'Because it is not in my nature—that is all.'

'It is not in Madeline's nature to do disagreeable things,' said Ruth.

'But then she has you with her,' pursued Alice. 'I could be good too, if I had you.'

A tear stood in her eye as she spoke. Ruth's heart was softened, and she gave Alice a kiss. The pent-up spirit which had before only partially shown itself, broke forth instantly. Alice burst into a renewed declaration of disappointment and discontent at her home; longings to be like Madeline and Ruth; regrets, fervent and sincere, for her own faults; and, at length, a half-expressed, yet earnest assurance, that if she had but a friend like Ruth, all would be well. She required, she was aware, some one to guide and interest her.

Ruth listened sympathisingly; and—shall it be owned?—with satisfaction. 'All would be well if Alice had a friend like her.' Ruth had no fear then of being insincere, of not respecting Alice. Another idea presented itself—influence. Her manner altered, and became more gentle and free. She spoke soothingly, yet firmly; she reminded Alice of her duties. It was pleasant to watch the gradual change which her words produced. Alice grew less vehement, more humble and affectionate. Ruth felt her own power, and her heart swelled within her. She spoke yet more strongly of submission and lowliness; she even ven-

Digitized by Google

tured at last to remind Alice of her approaching confirmation and the responsibility she must take upon herself. She said that it was necessary to make good resolutions, and recommended one even at that moment. It was, that Alice should try to please Lady Catharine by agreeing to attend the school; and when Alice consented after some hesitation, Ruth was quite satisfied with her morning's work.

'Mamma advises us to go out immediately,' said Madeline, interrupting the conversation a second time, 'and she says'—— Alice's tearful eyes, and Ruth's heightened colour made her pause for an instant; but the tact of a simple, unselfish mind suggested to her that it might be better not to ask questions, and she went on: 'Mamma says that we can take some biscuits with us, or we can have a sandwich before we set off; but we had better not wait for regular luncheon, for fear of not being back in time for dinner.'

'And where are we to go?' asked Ruth.

'Oh! any way we choose, and we may have the pony if we like it.'

'I should like Redford,' said Alice, in rather a low voice to Ruth. Ruth appeared not to hear. 'Can't we go?' continued Alice.

'Go! where?—to Redford? Yes, I suppose we can if we choose it.'

'You were wishing to go there, Ruth, only yesterday,' said Madeline.

Ruth still did not give a hearty assent; and as Madeline went to the farther end of the room, she said to Alice, with a slight air of annoyance—

'You wish to go to Redford, because you think you may meet Florence Trevelyan.'

'I don't know that I shall meet her,' answered Alice.

'But you think it probable; and she will not be of any use to you, Alice, if you want good friends.'

'There is no harm in wishing to see her,' observed Alice; 'and I can't say I think it kind in you to stand in the way. But, in fact, I am not at all certain of meeting her. I scarcely think it probable that I shall; but I should like to go to Redford, because every one talks about the church, and Lady Catharine will be glad for me to go.'

Ruth felt that she had tried to exert her newly-acquired influence over Alice rather too strongly. She said no more, but

Digitized by Google

entered into the plan cheerfully; pleasing herself with the hope of having made another little step towards gaining Alice's confidence and regard.

The restoration of Redford Church was a common subject of conversation in the neighbourhood. Ruth and Madeline had seen the plans, and heard them explained, and learned some of the principal terms of architecture connected with them; but Mr Clifford, in talking upon the subject, had impressed them with a much greater idea of the importance of the spirit with which such works should be undertaken, than of the value of a knowledge of the details.

Madeline's thoughts, as she approached Redford Church, were less of painted windows and oak carvings than of the sacredness of a place which was to be set apart for the worship of God, and which, it was therefore right, should be made as beautiful as possible.

Ruth's were a little different. She remembered it was a church which they were to see; and that her papa had told her he would rather she should not talk about it lightly to every one; but she was pleased to think that Alice was ignorant of the terms applied to the different parts, and felt a glow of satisfaction as she pointed out the tracery of the east window, and observed that it was taken from some old cathedral.

To Alice, Redford Church was like any other sight; very pretty, tolerably interesting, a good object for a long walk, and something to converse upon afterwards. The question that principally occupied her mind as they drew near to it was whether or not they should meet Florence Trevelyan.

Ruth understood what was passing in Alice's mind by the quick way in which she turned to look at any one who went by, and her careful notice of all the houses on the road. The idea that Alice was thinking of Florence, gave her a feeling of rivalship, and she exerted herself more to be agreeable; and at last succeeded in winning Alice's attention completely by rather an amusing account of a picnic party which had taken place a short time previously, and which she had heard described by a morning visitor. Ruth was not quite clear that the story was a desirable one to repeat, she had heard her mamma say it was rather ill-natured; but it was to entertain Alice, and prevent her from caring for Florence Trevelyan, and make her fond of being with them; and, without conceit, it was quite clear to

Digitized by Google

Ruth's mind that Alice was more likely to learn good from them than from Florence.

Ruth purposely, though insensibly to Alice, gave the conversation a graver turn as they drew near the church; and when they entered it, her manner became very serious. It was not natural, indeed, for one in whom the spirit of reverence had been so carefully cultivated, to feel anything but quiet awe in a building soon to be consecrated to God. Ruth looked at the font, which had been recently placed at the western entrance of the church, and it brought to her remembrance her baptismal vows, and the engagement which she must before long renew in the face of the assembled congregation. Her eye passed along the open seats, and it required but little imagination to picture them filled with rich and poor, met together for one common purpose, acknowledging the sins of the same sinful nature, and asking the pardon of the same God, through the Saviour who had died alike for all. Whilst holier, more solemn still—beyond, in the depth of the chancel, stood the altar, reminding her that, if her life were spared, she might, before many months were over, be permitted to kneel and receive the completion of her Christian privileges, the foretaste of the communion of heaven.

No! a church, even when unconsecrated, is not a place for a careless discussion of the beauties of architecture, and the display of our knowledge of corbels, and finials, and carvings, and the difference between modern and ancient glass. Unless we speak of these things with a full remembrance that they are connected with a sacred building, we had much better be silent.

Alice was easily influenced by example. She soon caught the tone of her companion's observations, and walked up the aisles quietly, making her remarks without any appearance of levity. Ruth noticed this, and flattered herself that it was partly the result of being with her. Alice was not naturally so subdued and reverent.

They were standing before the altar, and Ruth was remarking some peculiarities in the ornaments about it, when another party entered the church. Ruth was too much occupied with what she was saying to observe them, and both Alice and Madeline were listening to her attentively. The strangers were an elderly lady, a little girl of about eleven, and a young lady, rather pretty, very well dressed and slightly self-conscious in

Digitized by Google

manner. They advanced into the chancel. Ruth, not aware of their presence, continued her observations in a tone loud enough to be audible.

The young lady watched them for a few instants, then smiled and whispered something to her friend, and, stepping forward, gently touched Alice's shoulder.

'Florence!' exclaimed Alice, recovering from her first feeling of frightened displeasure.

Florence laughed heartily, and held out her hand to Ruth and Madeline.

She was in ecstasies at the meeting; it was delightful, charming; nothing in the world could be more fortunate; and her aunt would be so rejoiced to see them; where had they come from? how long had they been there? when were they obliged to go back?

Madeline stood in silent wonder; abashed at the height and fashionable appearance of her former schoolfellow.

Ruth was quite self-possessed.

'A charming church this is!' began Florence, putting up her eye-glass.

Ruth assented shortly.

'My aunt has been promising to bring me here ever since I arrived,' continued Florence; 'you must be introduced to my aunt—my aunt Harriet—Harriet, my sister, was named after her.'

Mrs De Lacy drew near, and Alice and her companions were introduced. She was a middle-aged, indolent-mannered, soft-voiced person, with a slight lisp. Ruth was not at all struck by her. Rather an awkward pause followed the introduction, and Mrs De Lacy, for want of something to say, observed that Ruth must have a considerable knowledge of architecture from the remarks she had been making.

'Oh, Ruth knows everything,' exclaimed Florence; 'she always did at school.'

'Not quite everything, Florence,' replied Ruth. 'Papa has taught me the terms of architecture; that is all I know.'

'And a great deal more than I do, or my aunt either,' exclaimed Florence. 'Aunt Harriet, we must make Ruth go round the church with us, and do the honours.'

Ruth declined the proposal, again insisting upon her own ignorance.

'Well, then, Madeline, you had always a little wisdom in your head, tell us all about the church.'

Digitized by Google

Madeline seemed quite amused at the idea of possessing any wisdom; but without hesitation told what she knew of the style, and the points which were particularly to be admired. Florence listened carelessly, and presently, putting her arm within that of Alice, drew her to the lower end of the church. Mrs De Lacy remained talking to Ruth and Madeline, and invited them both to return with her to her house, which was about half a mile distant. Ruth hesitated, and Mrs De Lacy pressed her with some earnestness. She was very glad, she said, to make their acquaintance. She had often heard her niece speak of them, and it would be a great advantage to Florence to have such agreeable, sensible companions whilst she was in the neighbourhood. Ruth's thanks were quietly given, but her hesitation was evidently less.

'Had we not better go home, Ruth?' said Madeline. 'We shall be late for dinner.'

'Oh! but surely just for this once. Your mamma is not very exacting, I am sure,' continued Mrs De Lacy.

Madeline blushed deeply, and, approaching her sister more nearly, whispered hurriedly, 'Mamma does not know Mrs De Lacy.'

'Come, I see you are inclined to yield,' persisted Mrs De Lacy. 'I shall hope to make your mamma's personal acquaintance before long, and then I shall be able to explain the case to her. Really, I cannot resist the opportunity of cultivating such a very desirable acquaintance.'

'We might walk part of the way together,' said Ruth.

'Yes; we might,' observed Madeline, great doubt being expressed in the word 'might.'

'Well, come part of the way, and I shall see whether I cannot persuade you to extend your walk the whole way,' said Mrs De Lacy, and she went forward to tell Florence that she had gained her point.

Alice was giving her whole attention to something which Florence was telling her, and she was very glad not to be immediately interrupted. She thanked Ruth cordially for consenting, and said it was very kind in her, and then she and Florence left the church together. They soon, however, rejoined Ruth; and Florence began thanking her again for going with them, declaring that it would have been a great disappointment if she had not done so; for they might not have another opportunity of seeing each other for some time.

Digitized by Google

'I wish, extremely, to hear all about the Parsonage,' she continued, 'what you do—how you spend your time. I heard such an account of you from a lady who dined at my aunt's the day before yesterday; and you know, Ruth, you were always a pattern to every one.'

Ruth's colour changed quickly, and she was silent. Florence went on talking to Alice. Mrs De Lacy, Madeline, and the two children were behind. What passed between Florence and Alice for the next few minutes Ruth did not very well know. That short allusion to bygone days had carried her mind back to school; its great temptations and her own weakness. Was she altered? Had the lapse of time, with the blessing of good advice and good example, strengthened her moral principles? Having reached an age when she could no longer be deemed a child, and about to be admitted to confirmation and the vast privilege succeeding it, was she really bent upon giving up all which might withdraw her heart from God? These are questions which we may ask at length; by Ruth they were only felt as a misgiving, a pang of conscience, a doubt whether the Ruth Clifford of the quiet country parsonage was not in too many respects the same Ruth Clifford of Mrs Carter's school, who had so sadly wandered from the straightforward path of duty.

'Now, Ruth, we must turn this way,' said Madeline, trying to gain her sister's attention, as they came to a place where four lanes met. 'It will lead us across the common into the Laneton road.'

Ruth was a short distance before, now again conversing upon a subject which apparently interested all parties—the home life at the Parsonage. She did not hear her sister, and went on.

'Must they not lead happy lives?' said Alice; as Ruth paused in her description. 'Much happier than mine.'

'Or mine!' remarked Florence, sighing. 'I only wish I could do just the same.'

'Oh! no, Florence; you like gaieties, and going out to dinner-parties and balls,' said Ruth. 'Alice has told me you are to begin soon; you would not bear our sober ways.'

'Florence would, though,' said Alice.

'Certainly I should. It was only the other day we settled how we should like to live together in a village; did we not, Alice? We would have a few friends to see us, now and then, and go out for a walk when we chose, and have a nice little pony-chaise.'

Digitized by Google

'And go to the schools, and see the poor people,' added Alice.

'Oh, yes, of course, do everything of that kind; live a complete country life, in short.'

Just then Madeline gained Ruth's attention by saying rather more loudly, 'Ruth, we have passed the turning; I don't think we must go any farther.'

'And there is Sheldon Lodge,' said Mrs De Lacy, pointing to a white house just seen amongst the trees.

'It will not make five minutes' difference to go on,' observed Alice.

'And I do so want to talk a little more,' said Florence.

Ruth answered that she was afraid they must wait for another opportunity; but she did not wish any one 'Good-bye.' She stood looking at the Lodge.

'Mamma would rather not, I am sure,' said Madeline, going up to her.

Mrs De Lacy did not hear what she said, but laughingly exclaimed, 'I suspect you are a little enemy. Suppose we make a compromise; you shall walk with us to the gate.'

'There can be no harm in that, Madeline,' said Ruth; and Madeline could not exactly say there was, only in her heart she wished it had been settled otherwise.

The gate was soon reached; there they were really to separate; but by this time a new cause had arisen for delay. Alice wanted Ruth to see a prize which Florence had gained the last half-year she was at school; actually a good-conduct prize. It was a very handsome book, 'One of the handsomest,' she said, 'which had ever been given by Mrs Carter;' and when Alice made this remark, she watched Ruth, as she had done once or twice before, to see the effect of her words. Ruth's manner to Florence had been gradually changing during the whole of this interview. At first she was rather cold; then cheerful, but indifferent; then interested; and now, there was clearly a certain mixture of respect. She did not like to give Florence any trouble, she said, and as they were in a hurry, perhaps it would be better to wait till another day. Florence would not be contented with this proposal. She wished to have Ruth's opinion about the book at once, because she was such a good judge.

'We might just go in for one minute,' said Alice.

Ruth really could see no objection, as they had come so far; and referring to Madeline, asked her whether she would not

Digitized by Google

come also. Madeline looked a little surprised and annoyed, and reminded her that it was getting late.

'We shall not be one minute—not half a minute,' exclaimed Florence, hastening towards the house, and Ruth and Alice followed her.

Madeline remained behind, making a laughing excuse to Mrs De Lacy that she wished to be a check upon the others: they would be ashamed to keep her waiting, and if they all went together, they might be tempted to stay for another hour.

Ruth was fully resolved only to be absent the 'one minute.' She walked very fast, saying several times that they had not an instant to spare; and declining Mrs De Lacy's invitation to go into the drawing-room, went up-stairs directly to Florence's apartment. Alice began to remark upon its prettiness, the pattern of the chintz furniture, the luxury of having a sofa, the convenience of the large wardrobe, and other such advantages; but Ruth was not to be diverted from her one object. She made Florence bring her the book immediately. It was Bishop Taylor's 'Holy Living and Dying.' Florence said she had read some of it, and liked it. Ruth knew it well, but she would not talk about it then; and, after admiring it extremely, she said they must manage to meet again soon; and, summoning Alice, led the way down-stairs. Alice lingered a little behind, and Ruth and Florence stood at the head of the stairs waiting for her. The staircase was a winding one, and from it they could look down into a stone hall, from which the doors of the different rooms opened. They heard Mrs De Lacy speaking to some one below. Florence listened, and drew back instantly.

'How provoking!' she exclaimed. 'Wait one minute; don't go down just now.' Ruth's foot was on the first stair.

'Indeed we must go. No one will take any notice of us,' she replied, impatiently.

Florence forcibly detained her, and when Alice joined them, she put up her finger to enforce silence.

'We did not expect you till this evening,' they heard Mrs De Lacy say.

Florence loosened her hold of Ruth.

'Now, we are safe. I hate encountering visitors.'

Ruth ran down the stairs. The drawing-room door was left open. They could see Mrs De Lacy placing a chair for a young lady. Ruth did not remark her particularly. Florence, as her

Digitized by Google

back was towards them, stepped before her, and took the handle of the door to shut it; but before she had succeeded, Ruth caught the voice and foreign accent of the stranger. She could not mistake it, though so long a time had elapsed since she had heard it.

'Justine le Vergnier!' she exclaimed.

Florence coloured crimson. She motioned to Ruth and Alice to enter a small study next the drawing-room, and, closing the door, said—

'I did not wish you to know—at least, not you, Ruth. I told Alice she was expected. But you must please promise me not to say you have seen her, even to Madeline; and if you hear anything about her, not to make any allusion to old times, Mrs Carter, and all that nonsense. It would be immensely unkind, and do great mischief.'

'I never feel myself bound to keep secrets unless I know a reason for it,' said Ruth, with some pride of manner. 'Why is Justine here?'

'It is a long story; there is not time to tell it now,' said Florence.

'But I do not like to have secrets from mamma,' observed Ruth; 'and Alice ought not to have any from Lady Catharine.'

'Trust Alice for that,' said Florence, laughing. 'Juno is not like Mrs Clifford. But, my dear Ruth, I thought I could trust you entirely; and I may want to consult you. You may really be of use to me, if you will only be wise just now; but I assure you, you do not know the mischief you may do if you are not.'

Florence was not clever; it was a sort of instinct which made her seize on Ruth's weak point. To be of use, to give advice, to have influence in fact, was a tempting bait to a person of Ruth's character.

'All I wish,' continued Florence, 'is, as I said before, that you should not mention having seen Justine here; and, if anything is said about her, that you should not refer in any way to the old story against her.'

Ruth could see no exact harm in the promise, yet she did not like promises. Alice declared her full belief that they were bound in honour not to say one word more than Florence desired. It would be cruel to rake up old offences. Ruth felt that good-nature was expected of her, whether true or false was

Digitized by Google

not the question. She hesitated. Florence again professed an intention of some day asking her opinion; and Alice said she was certain that Ruth would judge properly. It did seem unkind of Ruth to refuse, when she could not tell the reasons which might induce Florence to make the request; and if they were to differ now, it might produce a coldness which might never be overcome. This would be a pity, as Florence appeared improved and open to good impressions. So after some little consideration, Ruth agreed to say nothing for the present—'only for the present, however,' she repeated, as they left the house.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

'WHERE are you going, my dear Alice?' said Lady Catharine, a few mornings after the visit to Redford Church, as she met Alice dressed for walking, soon after breakfast.

'To the school, ma'am; it is my day.'

'To the school, my dear, alone? Why did you not tell me?'

'I thought you wished me to go, ma'am,' answered Alice.

'Certainly, my dear, I wished it. But this—really—I don't understand—you take me quite by surprise. Who told you to go this morning?'

'Mr Clifford told me this would be the best day, when I went to the Parsonage yesterday,' answered Alice.

'But to go without my knowledge! Very extraordinary! Come back, my dear, into the breakfast-room. Let me hear more about it—very extraordinary, indeed!'

Lady Catharine entered the breakfast-room with a stately step, and seated herself in a high-backed chair, against which, however, she would on no account have leaned.

'Now, my dear, let me hear something more; who do you say told you to go to the school?'

'You did, ma'am, and Mr Clifford.'

'We talked to you about it; but you were not inclined to undertake the duty, for a duty it clearly is. I should be glad, my dear, for the future, to understand you better.'

Digitized by Google

'I thought you would be pleased when I came back,' said Alice, with more humility than she had hitherto shown.

'Perhaps I might have been. I will not say that I should not; but I ought to have been told before. I like to be prepared. I cannot understand what your arrangements for the day are to be.'

Alice had made no arrangements. Ruth had been talking to her again about the school. Mr Clifford had named the day and the hour when it would be best for her to attend. She had half made up her mind the night before that she would go, and determined upon it decidedly that morning, as much because she was not in a humour for her ordinary occupations as from a principle of duty.

'Well!' continued Lady Catharine, recovering her usual dignity, and pitying Alice's discomposure—'I daresay you did not intend any harm, my dear; but you must remember I do not like surprises. If I had been prepared for this step, I should have formed different plans myself.'

'The step' seemed to Alice a very simple one, and instead of making apologies or excuses she asked if there was any reason now why she should not go.

'None at all, my dear—none that I know of; it is quite right, your duty, to attend at the school. I hope you will pay particular attention to Mr Clifford's instructions as to what you are to do. Still I could have desired—however, it cannot be helped, it is out of the question you should be with me, when you have arranged to take a morning at the school.'

'Are you going out, ma'am?' asked Alice, rather astonished.

'Only for some visits, my dear, at a distance; and I shall take Mrs De Lacy of Sheldon on my way back. I thought, as you informed me the other day that you had met your schoolfellow, Miss Trevelyan, at Redford, you might have liked to accompany me; but it does not signify; and as Miss Trevelyan is not a particular friend of yours, you will not so much care.' Alice was silent from vexation. 'I will not keep you, my dear,' continued Lady Catharine; 'no doubt, as Mr Clifford named the hour, he will be punctual and ready to tell you what you have to do. I shall be glad to hear when I return. You have no message, I conclude, for Miss Trevelyan?'

Alice had a message, which she wished very much to send. It was to repeat to Florence a caution she had hastily given her at their first meeting—not to say much about their being

Digitized by Google

intimate; but as this could not be sent through Lady Catharine, she could only reply in the negative, and Lady Catharine, begging her to make a proper apology to Mr Clifford if she should be late at the school, dismissed her.

Left to herself, Lady Catharine's manner changed. The severe features relaxed; the coldness of the gray eye was softened into melancholy, and the stern lips expressed tenderness and anxiety.

When would Alice cease to be reserved with her best friend? When would she understand her affection? When would she give any opening for sympathy? These were the questions which Lady Catharine asked herself. The reply came in a chill sense of disappointment. And Alice, notwithstanding her instability of character, would have bitterly reproached herself if she had known the pain which her inattention to Lady Catharine's habits, and her wilful impatience of anything approaching to reproof, so frequently caused.

Mr Clifford and Ruth were at the school together; and Mr Clifford, thinking that Alice would be less afraid with Ruth than with him, left them with a class whilst he went to examine the boys.

Teaching, unless we have a natural taste for it, is a very wearisome undertaking. Alice soon thought it so; and longing to have the lessons finished, spoke impatiently and rather unjustly to a child who was not perfect in her lessons. Injustice produced irritation of temper; irritation became want of respect; want of respect made Alice very angry. If Ruth had not been present she would have thrown down the book and left the class to itself. As it was, she cast an imploring glance at Ruth, entreating her to interpose. Ruth said but little, and in a much quieter tone than Alice, but she enforced instant attention; and Alice listened with surprise to the steady, orderly course of instruction which followed. Ruth seemed as much at home in her duties as if she had been accustomed to them from infancy. When the lessons were ended, Ruth did not make any observation upon Alice's failure; but proposed that they should inquire whether her father was ready to go. Alice gave a silent, moody assent.

'Well, Alice,' said Mr Clifford, as they took the road to the Parsonage, where Alice was to have her luncheon; 'how did you manage? Were the children perfect?'

'Not quite, papa,' interposed Ruth; 'Jane Stevens was naughty, and Kate Morrison was very idle.'

Digitized by Google

'They were all naughty, I think,' said Alice.

'All! rather a sweeping condemnation,' said Mr Clifford. 'But was it a great trouble to you, Alice?'

'Yes,' was upon Alice's lips, but she was afraid to speak it.

'You will grow more accustomed to it by and by,' observed Ruth. 'You will know how to manage better.'

'No, never; you are mistaken there, Ruth. I shall never manage, I shall never do anything.

'And why not, my dear,' said Mr Clifford; 'why are you to be so much more stupid than the rest of the world?'

'Because—I don't know—because—I shall be; because I am in everything—I always was. No one is ever pleased with me,' she added, in an under-voice.

Mr Clifford drew Alice's arm within his, and, pointing to a woman who was crossing the road lower down, he said, 'Ruth, just go forward and tell Mrs Barnes to call at the Parsonage this evening; I want to see her.'

Ruth ran on, and Mr Clifford, slackening his pace, said, 'Alice, my love, I am one of your oldest friends, and old friends are privileged. Will you let me ask you a question?'

Alice's hand trembled a little, but she did not speak.

'You are not happy, my dear,' continued Mr Clifford; 'Ruth tells me that she thinks you are not, and I can see it myself. Can I help you?'

'No, indeed. I am not unhappy; Ruth does not know about me,' answered Alice; 'I am vexed at not doing better at the school, but I cannot help it.'

'I am afraid that is not quite sincere,' rejoined Mr Clifford; 'however, as you had rather not talk to me, you shall not; only remember, that when I can ever be of use to you, I shall be quite ready to be so; for your own sake, and'—Mr Clifford spoke with some hesitation—'for your mother's sake.'

'My mother!' repeated Alice, 'every one loved her.'

'And every one will love her child, Alice, if only she will follow in the same footsteps.'

'Lady Catharine once told me I should never be like her,' said Alice, with some bitterness.

'Lady Catharine was speaking of your natural disposition,' replied Mr Clifford; 'you are hasty, eager, and easily led; your mother was gentle and firm. By nature you certainly are not like her; but it does not follow that you may not become so.'

'But no persons are exactly alike,' said Alice, rather perversely.

Digitized by Google

Mr Clifford did not seem to notice her manner, he only answered rather more gravely than before.

'The same Pattern is given to us all, Alice—a perfect one. The better we are, the more nearly we shall approach to it.'

'Mamma had always some one to love her,' continued Alice.

'Perhaps, my dear child, you do not understand the love which is given you,' answered Mr Clifford. 'Because it is hidden by a certain stiffness, and sometimes coldness of manner, you may think that it does not exist.'

'It is difficult to be always believing one is loved,' said Alice. 'One longs to see it and know it.'

'Yes, I own that,' replied Mr Clifford. 'It is a great trial of what may be called human faith. Still, actions are the best proofs of love.'

'Yes, I know, I really do know it,' exclaimed Alice, softened by finding that her troubles were acknowledged to be real. 'Very often I say to myself that I am ungrateful; still, things go on just the same.'

'But, Alice—you must not think that I am wishing to find fault with you because I ask the question—have you ever seriously set yourself to alter the state of things? You call Lady Catharine cold; have you ever yourself given her occasion to be otherwise?'

'I don't know; I have tried to love her,' said Alice.

'But trying to love is useless. We must act if we wish to feel. Lady Catharine has devoted herself in action to you, that you acknowledge; perhaps you have not done the same for her.'

Alice could not find what to answer.

'It is a very important question for you, my dear,' continued Mr Clifford, more authoritatively; 'a great deal of your happiness must depend upon the answer you can give to it. Will you think of it?'

They had reached the Parsonage gate as Mr Clifford said this. Ruth was waiting for them there. Alice withdrew herself from him, and walked into the house alone.

Ruth looked at her father for an explanation. He appeared vexed; and she did not like to ask him the cause.

He referred to it, however, by saying, 'Alice is very reserved.'

'Yes,' replied Ruth; 'that is, papa, she is reserved sometimes; but she is very odd. I think what she wants is some

Digitized by Google

one to love her. Nothing, it seems, will make her happy except that.'

'Nothing will make any of us happy but that,' replied Mr Clifford, with a peculiar, grave smile on his lips, which Ruth did not thoroughly understand.

Mr Clifford turned into a path leading to a distant part of the garden, and Ruth followed him.

'Papa,' she said, presently, 'if you have not influence over Alice, who can have?'

'It is not influence which we must trust to, Ruth,' replied Mr Clifford; 'we must have the mainspring in ourselves if we mean to be worth anything. It is religion which Alice wants.'

'And affection, too, papa,' said Ruth.

Mr Clifford walked on in silence.

Ruth did not feel that she might venture to interrupt him: he seemed thinking deeply.

At last he said, 'We must not separate religion and affection, my dearest child.'

'It does not seem that they have much to do with each other,' observed Ruth, in a tone of surprise.

'But,' replied Mr Clifford, 'we are told in the Bible that religion is to make us happy, and we feel in ourselves that it is happiness to love and be loved in return; there must, therefore, be love in religion: otherwise it could not satisfy us.'

'Yes,' replied Ruth, doubtfully.

'Perhaps I am not speaking clearly,' continued Mr Clifford; 'I will refer to Alice. The craving of her mind is for affection, at least, so she thinks; but if to-morrow she were to receive the most perfect human affection we can imagine, and to give her own to the same extent, she could not be happy for a continuance; because it is religion alone which can render her so.'

'But, surely, papa,' exclaimed Ruth, 'she might still be religious? We may love people without doing wrong.'

'What do you mean by being religious, Ruth?'

'Keeping God's commandments; trying to please Him; having faith in Him;' answered Ruth.

'That is what you mean. Now, what does the Bible mean?'

'I don't know; I can't understand;' answered Ruth, with an air of great astonishment. 'It says the same, I believe.'

'Do you remember,' inquired Mr Clifford, 'our Saviour's answer to the question of the lawyer: "Which is the great

Digitized by Google

commandment in the law?" "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."'

'Yes,' replied Ruth, thoughtfully, 'I know that religion is the love of God, but I did not think of saying it.'

'Love,' repeated Mr Clifford: 'not obedience merely; still less fear; but love. A real, warm, devoted, intense feeling of the heart. Love to our blessed Lord as to a human friend; only with the fullest, most unwavering confidence in His affection. Such a feeling as will make us turn to Him in all our troubles, as sure of His sympathy; which will make us delight in the smallest occasions of showing our affection; which will make us find real happiness in prayer, and reading the Bible, and receiving the Holy Communion. This is religion, Ruth; the religion which is to make us blest in life, and full of peace in death.'

'Papa,' said Ruth, in a tone of deep seriousness, 'I am afraid I shall never feel this; but I hoped I was trying to be religious.'

'I have been speaking of the end of religion, my dearest Ruth, not the beginning. The effort at obedience must come first; the joy of love will be our reward afterwards. When it is ours, we shall have attained the object of our lives; we shall be happy.'

'But,' said Ruth, 'we were intended to love our fellow-creatures also; it comes to us quite naturally.'

'Yes, to love them deeply and devotedly, but not to rest our highest affection upon them; not to feel that without them life would have neither interest nor hope.'

'I should be very miserable without you and mamma,' said Ruth.

'Yet the time will come when we must part, my dear child. If you give us your whole heart, you are resting your happiness on a broken reed.'

'But it seems so difficult, so impossible, not to love one's friends,' exclaimed Ruth. 'I always feel with Alice when she talks to me about it.'

'I do not for an instant wish you not to love them most dearly,' replied Mr Clifford; 'only, not to put them first. I will tell you a mistake which many persons—young persons especially, are apt to make. It is the secret of a vast portion of their unhappiness and disappointment. They say they wish

Digitized by Google

to be religious, and they set about performing their duties strictly; they pray regularly, and go to church, and read the Bible, and try to correct their evil tempers—and, in a measure, they succeed and improve; but still religion does not make them happy.'

Mr Clifford paused, and Ruth thought, though she did not express it, that this was her own case.

'Such persons,' continued Mr Clifford, 'are servants, very good servants; but they are not children; I mean, of course, in feeling. Now why do you think this is?'

'Because they are not so good as they ought to be, I suppose,' answered Ruth.

'But they are in earnest, trying very much: the secret is, that they are giving their obedience to God, but their hearts to their fellow-creatures. They do not think of God as their Friend. I use the word in its plain, literal sense. They do not feel that He loves them. They pray for great things, but they do not mention before Him the little circumstances which interest them, or make them anxious. They own that their Redeemer has saved them from punishment, but they do not see that He saves them from daily annoyance. They take their trifling comforts and pleasures as matters of course; whereas, if they thought rightly, every petty gratification would be a source of delight, as the mark of an especial love.'

'But it seems almost irreverent to think of religion in such little instances,' said Ruth.

'How do you feel towards me, Ruth, when you thank me for a trifling kindness?'

'That is so different,' answered Ruth.

'Ah! my love, there is the mistake. We think that the love of God is something totally unlike the love of our fellow-creatures, when, in fact, it is the very same feeling, only purified and exalted. As I said before, it is not obedience, or fear, or even reverence; though, of course, all these must exist with it. It is actually love. As we could love a human being, and give up our hearts to him in the confidence of meeting a full return, so we may and must love God, if we ever intend that religion should be our happiness.'

'God is so far above us,' said Ruth, in a low voice.

'And, therefore, Ruth, once He became man that we might learn to love Him.'

Ruth sighed despondingly.

Digitized by Google

'I would not for the world discourage you, my dearest child,' continued Mr Clifford. 'Obedience, and reverence, and fear—which I can quite understand are all you yet associate with religion—are most excellent in themselves; quite necessary as a beginning. But what I wish you, and Madeline, and Alice to feel, is that there is something far beyond—something, which if you really strive after, you must one day attain. When you renew your vows at your confirmation, I would wish you to do it in the spirit of children.'

'If we were good we might do so,' answered Ruth.

'You are fast emerging from childhood, Ruth,' continued Mr Clifford. 'You can look back upon your early life, and judge of and learn from it. When you were a little child, did your mother and I love you because you were good?'

Ruth was about to answer 'Yes;' but she stopped herself. 'You loved me when I was good,' she replied; 'you often told me so.'

'Certainly I did: but often you were naughty. Did we cease to love you then?'

'You were displeased with me,' replied Ruth.

'But did we cast you off? Was not ours a patient, enduring love, which bore with your faults, and watched with delight the slightest improvement?'

'Yes,' replied Ruth, heartily. 'I should never have improved at all but for that.'

'And now,' continued Mr Clifford, 'you are reaching an age when all that you have felt and acted upon towards your earthly parents is to be felt and acted upon towards God. God has been pleased so to order our earthly existence that all things belonging to it should be the types of our spiritual existence. As we read of death and the resurrection, in the course of the sun, in the seed sown in the ground, in the transformation of insects; so we may read the course of our mortal life in the history of our early years. The love which you have felt for me is the love which one day, if you ever wish for happiness, you must feel towards God.'

'I cannot fancy it the same,' said Ruth.

'In one respect it will not be the same,' replied her father. 'As it is to be directed to an infinitely Higher Object, so it must be, in its perfection, infinitely more satisfying.'

'Yes, in its perfection,' said Ruth, doubtfully.

'And even in its imperfection—in its germ—it must bring

Digitized by Google

more real happiness than any inferior affection There can be no distrust in it. It must unite all that is deepest and purest of the most engrossing earthly love; the fond reverence of a child for a parent—the entire confidence of brother with brother—the fulness of sympathy of the nearer ties which we form for ourselves—all hallowed, strengthened, ennobled by the sense that the Being to whom we have devoted ourselves is Almighty and Unchangeable.'

'I should like to think that I could ever feel it,' said Ruth.

'Wish for it—and, if you cannot do that, pray that you may be taught to wish for it—my dear child, and you will have taken a first step towards realising it. Too many persons never wish for it; they do not know—they scarcely ever think what the love of God means. They have a low notion of religion; they suppose it is only intended to make them what they call good—moral, well-conducted.'

'But it must do so,' said Ruth.

'Yes, indeed, it must, or it has no reality; but it is also intended to do much more—to make us happy. Even in the common view of religion, however, there is a mistake. We can never serve God rightly in our daily duties unless we worship Him, and are grateful to Him, and trust, and pray to, and honour Him—in one word, give Him our hearts and love Him. We see every day the difference between the service of love and that of fear or necessity. One is happiness, the other wearying labour.'

Ruth repeated the word 'happiness' to herself, as if unable to realise what her father said.

'This is not a truth to be understood by reasoning,' continued Mr Clifford; 'yet it is a certain fact that no one ever loved God, and was disappointed. Ask any person—however poor, or suffering, or lonely—whether he would exchange the feeling for any other, however pure and strong, and he will say "No." And as you go forward in life and find yourself more exposed to its trials, Ruth, you will understand what I mean when I say that it gives us rest. You are young now; rest scarcely seems a blessing; by and by it will be your one great longing, and nothing but the intense devotion of the affections to God will give it.'

'It seems to me as if I could be satisfied if any one like myself loved me better than anything else in the world,' said Ruth.

Digitized by Google

Mr Clifford smiled sadly. 'Ah, Ruth! so you may be satisfied for a time—many have been—but the satisfaction cannot continue. If there is nothing higher—no one Perfect and Immortal Being who has the first place—there must be disappointment in the end.'

Ruth looked incredulous.

'I cannot expect you to believe all this at once,' said Mr Clifford. 'I would not have said it if I had not felt that you were approaching an age when you might need it. Only I will ask you to think of this—even in human affection the knowledge that we are beloved tends to increase, and very often to excite our feelings in return. There are facts in the Bible which place the love of God to us beyond the possibility of doubt; and there are words in the Bible so full of gentle, tender, wonderful affection, that the most anxious heart could require no more. They are to be found in the prayer of our blessed Lord for His disciples and for those who afterwards should believe in Him. There seems an especial care that no doubt should exist upon this point. The petition is, that "all may be one"—one with God, loved with that same unutterable love which was the perfection of our Lord's blessedness in heaven. Ruth, my child, will you read those words thoughtfully, with reverence, kneeling before God, and praying Him to teach you to understand them?'

What Ruth might answer Mr Clifford did not wait to hear. He imprinted a kiss upon her forehead, and left her alone to think.

And was Ruth in a state of mind to think? Could she comprehend her father's words? Comprehend them she did as far as that implies understanding their literal meaning; and even in a higher sense she could in a measure enter into them; for Ruth, like many of her age whom God has gifted with warm affections and thoughtful minds, had often felt the longing for some devoted affection to satisfy her dream of happiness. Madeline could live from day to day without thinking of the future—contented in the peaceful enjoyments of her home, the fondness of her parents, the sympathy of her sister, the pleasant, unrestrained companionship of Alice; but Ruth's mind was continually wandering forth to the unknown years which lay before her, seeking to know what she should do, how she should feel, where her lot would be cast. And in those wanderings, those visions of a life yet more blest, more exciting and engrossing than was yet granted her, the one great ingredient of happiness

Digitized by Google

was always a perfect affection. Mr Clifford had now told her of means by which this vision of happiness might be realised; and Ruth's trust in her father's truth made her listen to him with a degree of confidence which she might not otherwise have felt. She saw that he was speaking from his own personal experience, and she could, in a certain way, suppose it possible one day to do the same. But as yet the deep realities of religion, its power of occupying the mind and satisfying the heart, were to Ruth like the description of a foreign country to a person who has never beheld it. Its existence is fully believed, but it presents to the imagination only an unsubstantial picture. Perhaps it was not possible that, at such an early age, Ruth should enter fully into the conversation which had just passed: and before the peace which Mr Clifford had described could, even in the future, be hers, there was much, very much to be done. Ruth's conscience told her this whilst her father was talking with her; and when he had left her, the conviction returned more strongly.

Since the visit to Redford Church, Ruth's mind had never been entirely at rest. She had mentioned to her mother the interview with Mrs De Lacy and Florence, and the fact of having spent a few minutes at Sheldon Lodge. The acknowledgment did not require much moral courage, for Mrs Clifford was too considerate to find fault where apparently no harm was intended. Mrs De Lacy was a person whom every one visited, and Mrs Clifford herself called upon her almost immediately afterwards, and although it happened they did not meet, yet the acquaintance was put upon a regular footing.

But Ruth was not the happier because her mamma was kind: it was more than she knew herself to deserve. It was not that she could accuse herself of having done anything seriously wrong; but she had consulted her own will all that afternoon at Redford. She had overlooked the question of what might please her mother most, and had followed her own inclination; and, as a punishment it seemed, she had been led into a secret—a trifling one apparently, but still a secret. Ruth had that fretting sense of uneasiness continually about her, which is the natural consequence of a heart not right with God. She tried to put aside the idea of having been in any way to blame, or having brought a secret upon herself. She could not make up her mind to practise any close self-examination; and, forgetting her own needs, she thought only of Alice.

When she begged Alice to attend to her duty at the school,

Digitized by Google

and when, by eagerness and perseverance, she gained her point, there was something pleasant to dwell upon. She could look back to her outward acts, and be satisfied.

And this was the way in which Ruth found rest for her conscience now, when it suggested that something was not quite right within; and that this 'something' must be rooted out before it would be in the least possible to attain, even in the faintest degree, the happiness in religion which her father had described.

She said to herself that she would be more energetic than ever in doing all that was to be done at home, and would strive to keep Alice up to her resolutions; and she thought of one or two ways in which she might be more useful in the school; and then the feeling of self-contentment glided unobserved into her breast, and she was at peace.

There are two kinds of peace—true and false.

'Ruth, you will walk back with me to the Manor,' said Alice, when luncheon was over. 'Lady Catharine will be home soon, so I must not stay here.'

There was an accent of bitterness in this remark which did not escape Mr Clifford's ear. He stopped as he was leaving the room, and said, 'Lady Catharine likes to be welcomed, I suppose. Every one does. Half the pleasure of going out is the satisfaction of having some one to hear all you have done when you return.'

Alice blushed a little, but repeated her request to Ruth, saying it would be dull to wait by herself.

Ruth had in her mind the recollection of a previous engagement, and Madeline reminded her of it. They were to take a small parcel of clothes to a woman at the other end of the parish.

'It is a dreadfully disagreeable day,' said Ruth, who happened to have on a neat new morning dress; 'would it do to wait till to-morrow?'

'We promised,' replied Madeline; 'that is, if we could manage it.'

'But you cannot, because of its being so dirty,' interposed Alice; 'that settles the matter.'

'No, indeed, Alice,' exclaimed Ruth, laughing; 'one cannot manage things quite so easily as that. If we have promised, we must go, though it is dirty.'

'Then you will not consider me,' said Alice, with an air of

Digitized by Google

disappointment; 'and I have not said a word to you about the school; and I thought we should have had time for a nice talk before Lady Catharine came in.'

'What do you say, Maddy?' asked Ruth; 'do you think we can put it off?'

'No,' replied Madeline, without hesitation; 'Alice will have a good many opportunities of talking about the school before it is her turn to go again; but Mrs Corbin wants the clothes very much.'

'Only you need not both go, I suppose,' said Alice.

'Mamma does not like our walking so far alone,' answered Madeline.

'I declare you are quite provoking to-day, Madeline,' said Alice. 'You put obstacles in the way of everything I propose.'

Madeline's cheek crimsoned with anger, and a half-uttered word escaped her lips. She walked to the window, and stood looking out of it for a few moments.

'You should not be unkind to Madeline,' observed Ruth, in a low tone to Alice.

Alice began to excuse herself.

Presently Madeline came back to them, and said, 'I have thought what we can do. Martha, our housemaid, was to go this afternoon to see her mother, who lives very near Mrs Corbin. I will take her with me.'

'That will not be quite as pleasant as if I were with you,' said Ruth.

'No!' and Madeline smiled sweetly. 'There are not many things as pleasant as to have you with me, but I should like you to go with Alice.'

'Thank you, Maddy, very much indeed,' said Alice, coming forward and giving her a kiss. 'I shall enjoy my half-hour's talk with Ruth immensely.'

Madeline hoped she would, and left the room. Ruth followed her.

'Maddy, it seems unkind to let you go alone; but the fact is, I do want to talk to Alice. I have a great deal to say to her about the school; and I really think she is beginning to listen to me. It would be an immense pity to miss doing her good if one has the opportunity.'

'Yes, indeed, it would. I am so delighted that she will let you talk to her. Nobody else will be of as much use to her.'

Digitized by Google

And you don't very much mind?' inquired Ruth, affectionately.

'Mind! oh, no! not in the least; and I shall have all Mrs Corbin's gratitude to myself to console me.'

Madeline ran merrily up the stairs. Ruth stood below, slightly uncomfortable.

Just then Mr Clifford came out of his room.

'In a brown study, Ruth? what is the matter? What are you going to do with yourself this afternoon?'

'I am going back to the Manor with Alice,' answered Ruth.

'To the Manor, are you? but that is not a very long walk for a summer's afternoon. I thought you and Madeline were to have taken Mrs Corbin's parcel to her?'

'Yes, so we intended, papa; but Alice wished me to be with her, and then Madeline said she would walk alone; that is, not alone exactly, but with Martha. Martha is going to see her mother.'

'Oh!' was all Mr Clifford's reply, as he leaned against the balustrade, thinking.

Ruth was not entirely pleased with the 'Oh!' it seemed like dissatisfaction. She was going away, but her father called her back.

'Ruth, my child, do you remember the conversation we had the other night about Alice?'

'Yes, papa,' said Ruth, blushing.

'I only wished to remind you of it. Don't set your heart upon converting and influencing Alice; you will go wrong if you do.'

'But, dear papa, may I not make her do right if I can?'

'By all means, to the very utmost; but take care that you do not go the wrong way to work. Remember, we must think of our own duties first.'

'Yes, papa, of course.'

After those words, 'of course,' there was nothing more to be said. Besides, Mr Clifford was just then particularly engaged.

Ruth returned to the drawing-room, and found her mamma there, ready with the parcel for Mrs Corbin. Mrs Clifford looked a little disappointed when Ruth mentioned her intention of going to the Manor.

'It would be a dull, disagreeable walk for Madeline,' she said; 'and Alice would not have long to remain alone; and Mrs Corbin had wished particularly to see Ruth. If you remember,

Digitized by Google

my dear,' she continued, 'it was your own proposal to go to her, when your papa told you she was one of the persons you might read to occasionally.'

'Yes,' answered Ruth, hesitatingly; 'but I thought'—— She stopped. 'No, I did not think about it; but Madeline could read instead of me.'

'I will not interfere with you, my love; do as you feel it best. You know I am always glad for you to be any pleasure or comfort to Alice.'

Nothing more was said. Ruth could scarcely tell why she felt as if she was doing wrong. She spent several moments in thinking, and at last decided that it was a mere waste of time to worry herself with over-scrupulousness. She could see no harm; and neither her papa nor her mamma had found actual fault with her, so that there could be no precise reason for not keeping her engagement with Alice, in the hope possibly of being of service to her.

And Ruth was not absolutely faulty in her decision. It was not the question whether or not she should go to the Manor which caused her disquietude. It was the consciousness that she had been consulting her own wishes; looking first to inclination, and then to duty, and so allowing her judgment to be biassed.

Still she went; it would have been unkind, she thought, to Alice not to do so. And still she hoped that by going she might be of use in strengthening Alice in the path of duty.

CHAPTER XXXV.

RUTH and Alice pursued their walk to the Manor in silence. Ruth's zeal for Alice's improvement had received a check, and Alice was apparently occupied with a subject of sufficient interest to stop the usual flow of her conversation. They had entered the park before either of them spoke, and then it was Alice, who said—

'Maddy is excessively good; but she is not a bit like you, Ruth.'

'No,' replied Ruth, laughing. 'Mamma often says we have the most twin-like faces, and the most untwin-like minds, of

Digitized by Google

any persons she ever knew. The wonder is we get along so well together.'

'I don't know what it is about her,' pursued Alice; 'but sometimes I think I am afraid of her: and yet it is very strange, I am not afraid either—it would be absurd: she is so much younger, and I can say all sorts of nonsense to her, much more than I can to you.'

'I am graver than she is, naturally,' replied Ruth.

'Yes, so you are: yet Madeline is not like the girls at school, though I am sure we used to talk nonsense enough.'

'There can be no doubt of that,' observed Ruth.

'Ah! but not in your days; we were pieces of perfection then. After you went was the time. There was no one to keep order. Florence and I used to say it was very wrong, but you know we had no power to stop anything.'

'I should not have thought Florence cared about it,' said Ruth.

'I daresay you would not: you have a prejudice against her.'

'No, Alice, not a prejudice; that means a feeling without a reason. Now I have quite a sufficient reason for distrusting Florence;' and, as she said this, Ruth's voice was a little hurried. 'But really and truly I have no prejudice against her. I liked her a great deal better the other day; and I should have liked her a great deal more if it had not been for that stupid nonsense about Justine.'

'Florence is not so wrong there,' said Alice, mysteriously.

'So you have told me two or three times when we have talked about it. But what am I to think? How can it be necessary to exact a promise? I am not going to spread a bad report of Justine everywhere; it would be uncharitable. At the same time, there can be no harm in saying that we knew her at Mrs Carter's.'

'That would bring on other questions, and would be dangerous. I cannot explain exactly why, but it would be; and at all events, now your promise is given.'

This was a very provoking fact to be reminded of. It made Ruth hasten on a little before Alice, and relapse into silence.

'One thing, Ruth, I must tell you,' said Alice, renewing the conversation, as they entered her own sitting-room, just at the point at which it had been broken off; 'that you don't know the good you may do by having made such a promise. Florence

Digitized by Google

will be obliged to you always, and so will Justine; and if you take care, you may guide them to anything you like.'

'Guide Justine!' exclaimed Ruth, surprised; 'but she is not going to stay in this neighbourhood?'

'Possibly; you must not ask questions—perhaps she may some time or other; and if she does, you may do a great deal for her. And as for Florence herself, she says that she can never imagine you as young as you are; and that when she met you the other day, she felt at once that you were just as superior as you used to be.'

Alice spoke without any intention of flattery. Flattery between girls, who had known each other intimately from childhood, was out of the question. Perhaps it was the knowledge of this which made Ruth listen with patience to such undisguised praise. She made but a slight effort to turn the conversation by saying—

'And when did you and Florence find time for this long discourse about me?'

'Oh! when we were together at the lower end of the church; Florence began the subject directly. She was anxious to know whether I thought you would agree to keep Justine's secret.'

'And what did you say?'

'I could not tell; I was afraid not. I thought you disliked secrets; and I was to have asked you about it: but seeing Justine took us by surprise. Florence did not expect her till an hour later.'

Here Alice went away to take off her walking dress, and left Ruth standing moodily by the fire-place, thinking how silly she had been in giving a promise which after all it seemed Florence scarcely expected to receive. However, as the common and most delusive saying is, 'the thing was done and could not be helped, and she must make the best of it;' which just then meant to forget it.

With a view to forgetfulness, Ruth began another subject when Alice came back.

'We will talk a little now about your troubles and the school, Alice; shall we?'

Alice's troubles, however, dated further back than the school. They originated in what she called Lady Catharine's 'tiresomeness.' The school was a secondary consideration; perhaps in time she might learn to manage and teach, but the home worries were unendurable; and she began a

Digitized by Google

narration similar to that to which Ruth had many times listened before.

Ruth, however, dexterously diverted the current of her ideas. She had already given all the advice that was to be given, as to patience, humility, gratitude, reverence; and she had quickness enough to perceive that one thing which Alice required was to be furnished with interesting occupation, to prevent her from dwelling peevishly upon trifles. She referred again, therefore, to the school, and her own difficulties when first she commenced teaching, and the mode in which she had overcome them by taking her father's advice. From the school, she proceeded to speak of the poor people, and to ask whether Alice would be inclined to join with Madeline and herself in saving up money to buy clothes, and make them; and whether she could assist them by keeping the accounts of the shoe club: all which pleased Alice, and made her feel herself a person of some use in the world.

'You are very, very kind, dear Ruth,' she said, when Ruth had made these propositions. 'You are never worried or out of temper, and you are always ready to help me. I think I may be good for something after all—don't you—if I take to the schools and the poor people?'

'Who ever doubted it?' said Ruth, amused at the simplicity of the question.

'I doubt it very often,' replied Alice, with a sudden change of manner. 'You don't know me, Ruth; you, who are so good, and have always been good—you don't know what thoughts are in my mind sometimes; they would frighten you, they are so wild and strange—as if it was impossible, as if it was not meant I should be good. But people can be good if they like, can't they?'

'Alice,' said Ruth, earnestly; 'I wish you would talk to papa.'

'I cannot, he frightens me: and he would not understand. To-day, when he spoke to me, I could not have answered him, as he wished to be answered, for all the world. There is no one but you, Ruth; no one! When we were at school, I could have said more to you than to any person; only you were never inclined to listen.'

Ruth turned to her with an expression of real interest which could not be mistaken.

'I am willing to listen to you at all times, upon every subject,

Digitized by Google

dear Alice,' she said; 'but you sometimes own that you are changeable. When you change, it can be no wonder that I should change likewise. And though you say I would not listen to you at school, you must remember that whilst you professed to be fond of me, you were always going with others; and especially with some whom I particularly disliked: and now you have Florence Trevelyan.'

'Florence! that is absurd! How could Florence ever be your rival?'

'Because you would make her so. You do not know your own mind. If Florence is to be with you much, she will guide you entirely.'

'Never. I have no respect for her judgment, though I like her. But you might guide her.'

'I!' exclaimed Ruth. 'I! who am so much younger!'

'Yes; because she respects you.'

'If Florence thinks about respecting people,' said Ruth, 'she had better not have secrets with Justine le Vergnier.'

'It is only one secret. The fact is, that poor Justine has had a good deal of trouble, and Florence knows it; and now it would be unkind to cast her off, and do her harm.'

'All a mystery,' said Ruth, shaking her head.

'But you cannot blame her for being kind, at any rate,' continued Alice; 'and you cannot blame me for calling her improved—years ago she would have thought only of herself.'

'Yes, that is true,' answered Ruth.

'And now she is in the neighbourhood, and you may do her good,' pursued Alice; 'only you must not be jealous.'

Ruth smiled at the word 'jealous.' It was much too strong for any feeling which she entertained either towards Alice or Florence.

'I am not in the least jealous,' she replied; 'but, as I said before, I should like you to know your own mind.'

'Hark! was not that the hall bell?' exclaimed Alice. 'Did you hear a carriage? How extremely unfortunate!' She ran to the door and listened. 'Yes; she is come home. How tiresome! Ruth, dear, just let me give you one caution. If Lady Catharine talks about Florence, don't speak as if I was anything of a friend of hers; I mean anything particular. Take care what you say, that is all.'

'Alice! Alice!' exclaimed Ruth, with a look of great annoyance; 'how can you bear to have mysteries about everything?

Digitized by Google

So foolish it is; so extremely silly—and wrong too! Why must not Lady Catharine know all that you say or do?'

'It is a mere trifle, no harm,' answered Alice. 'Only there was a foolish mistake of mine the other morning, I can't explain now; but there is really no harm. Won't you believe me?'

Ruth turned silently away.

'Good-bye to confidence, then,' exclaimed Alice. 'How could I have been so absurd as to think you cared for me!'

'You don't give me your confidence,' said Ruth, quietly. 'You do things first, and ask me to conceal them afterwards.'

'Do things first! Really, Ruth, you are too silly. One would think I had committed murder, and wanted you to hide it. But we won't talk about it.'

Alice was going away to meet Lady Catharine. Ruth prevented her.

'I have no wish to be in any way unkind to you, Alice; but, if you will take my advice, you will give up mysteries.'

'I always meant to take your advice for the future; but this is a case past.'

Ruth saw that Alice was growing proud and angry. She thought of the suggestions she had just given regarding the school and the poor people. Alice seemed upon the point of attending to them, and they would materially aid in forming her character. If she were checked in her good inclinations they might not return, and what she required was more silence than anything else. It would be easy on another occasion to show her that she was wrong. These ideas passed rapidly through Ruth's mind.

'Well! let it be for this once,' she said, hastily; 'but we must talk more upon the subject by and by.'

'Thank you a thousand times. And you will love me still?' said Alice, giving her a hearty kiss. 'I love you dearly.'

The kiss was returned, but Ruth was not certain of the desired love, and evaded an answer.

'Is Miss Lennox within?' was Lady Catharine's first inquiry after giving some particular directions respecting the purchases made at Cottington, and sending a message to the groom to look carefully after the two fat carriage horses, as they had had a hard day's work.

'Miss Lennox and Miss Clifford had been in the house more than an hour,' was the reply received; and if Alice had seen the gleam of pleasure which lighted up Lady Catharine's face at

Digitized by Google

the mere mention of her name, she might have been satisfied that her absence or presence were no matters of indifference. Lady Catharine really walked quickly up the stairs.

'Well, my love!' she exclaimed, as she entered the apartment; 'I thought I should surprise you. I have returned sooner than I expected.'

'We heard the carriage, ma'am,' answered Alice.

This chilling answer was quite sufficient for Lady Catharine. She turned to Ruth. 'And how long have you been here, my dear? I did not know Alice would have a companion whilst I was away.'

Ruth answered the question; and Lady Catharine put several others formally, and with that air of indifference which betrays thoughts wandering to other subjects.

Alice offered to take her bonnet and shawl away.

Lady Catharine thanked her, but declined rather coldly; and taking a note from her reticule, gave it to her, saying, 'Miss Trevelyan sent you this, Alice; it is an invitation, I believe, to a picnic. Mrs De Lacy mentioned the subject to me, but I have not decided upon accepting it. And here is an invitation for your mamma, also, Ruth; which I offered to bring.'

Alice kept her note unopened till Lady Catharine was gone. It was a long one, and two or three times whilst Alice was perusing it she looked anxiously towards the door, and listened. When she had finished, she replaced it in the envelope in evident perplexity.

'Shall you wish to go?' inquired Ruth.

'Yes; I think I should like it; but'—here Alice paused, and her colour changed as the sound of a closing door at the end of the passage warned them that Lady Catharine might be about to return. 'Ruth,' she continued, speaking in a hurried tone, 'I should be so much obliged if you could do me a favour.'

'Well! what?'

'This note—if you would take it. Florence writes so foolishly, I can't show it to Lady Catharine. I told her to be careful, but she is not. If you would take it and go.'

'I!' repeated Ruth; 'it is not mine.'

'But don't you understand? If you have it; if you take it home, you can burn it, or keep it; in short, I can say that you have it; and if Lady Catharine asks to see it, there will be an answer ready. It is only just for once; indeed, it shall not happen again.'

Digitized by Google

'This system of yours is entirely wrong, Alice,' replied Ruth; 'and, if you persist in it, you will repent it. You never can continue to keep your confidence from Lady Catharine without getting into difficulties.'

'I know it quite well,' answered Alice; 'but this is a peculiar case. As I told you, there was a stupid mistake the other morning, and this note will only puzzle Lady Catharine. I will take care that Florence shall not write in the same way again. To prove to you that there is no harm in the note, I do not in the least mind your seeing it.' As she said this, Alice put the paper into Ruth's hand. 'Do go, please go,' she continued; 'it shall all be explained another day.'

'I had rather not,' replied Ruth, laying the note on the table.

'O Ruth! how unkind! And I thought you loved me!'

'But, Alice, I cannot see that it is right.'

Alice's answer was in a tone of nervous anxiety. 'Ruth, if you would only believe me—only trust me—I wish to be guided by you in everything.'

'And if I say that Lady Catharine ought to see it, will you show it to-morrow?' inquired Ruth.

'Yes, yes; to-morrow, or some day; anything you please. Dear Ruth! I depend upon you more than upon any one.'

Lady Catharine's voice was heard. Alice opened the door. 'Pray, pray go; good-bye.'

'But it will be strange for me to be gone in such a moment,' said Ruth.

'No, no; she understands that you have heaps of engagements.'

'And you will do what I tell you?'

'Yes, you shall advise me entirely.'

Ruth, still with a hesitating step, drew near the door; then, as Lady Catharine was really heard approaching, she gave Alice a hasty shake of the hand, and ran down-stairs.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

RUTH'S first impulse, when she found herself walking quietly through the park, out of reach of Lady Catharine's quick eye, was to open Florence Trevelyan's note. Yet, as she did

Digitized by Google

so, the feeling which prompted her to look round and see if any person was near, was unusual and disagreeable. It was the sense of being a party to deception, of all things most galling to the conscience of one like Ruth, sincere both by nature and education. And when the note was first read, it seemed as if there could have been no cause for Alice's uneasiness. Florence wrote warmly, entreating Alice to persuade Lady Catharine to allow her to join in a picnic party, which was to take place soon, though the exact day was not fixed. Ruth could not comprehend why Alice should have objected to Lady Catharine's seeing this; but after a second perusal, she turned to the other side of the paper, and perceived an additional sentence: 'I am not the only person wishing to see you; things are going just as we wished; they are all but settled.'

Ruth uttered an exclamation of disgust. These perpetual mysteries were becoming intolerable. The person referred to must be Justine; but what was meant by all things being settled, was beyond Ruth's comprehension. She pondered much upon the subject as she sauntered leisurely home, purposely prolonging her walk that she might have leisure for thought.

The conclusion at which she arrived was no explanation of the note; but simply a determination to use her utmost efforts to persuade Alice to be open in all cases; and, as a commencement, to have no more communications with Florence Trevelyan which could not be made known to Lady Catharine.

Ruth's engagements for the next day were fixed. Her morning studies had been marked out for her by her mother, and her afternoon employment had been settled by her father. She had no spare moments; yet when Mrs Clifford expressed a wish to have a book taken to the Manor, Ruth threw aside her history, and proposed to be the bearer of it. Madeline, however, interposed, saying that she was obliged to go into the village on some business of Mrs Corbin's; and, as she should pass the Manor lodge, the book might be left there. Ruth looked somewhat annoyed, and was vexed, she said, to lose the walk as it was so fine—a declaration which surprised Madeline not a little; Ruth's usual theory being, that to go out early after breakfast was to destroy the comfort of the day. No one, however, could do Mrs Corbin's business as well as Madeline, and the affair was quickly settled, Ruth sitting down again to her history; then beginning a note to Alice, which was presently torn to atoms, and recurring once more to her book, with the

Digitized by Google

unpleasant consciousness that her words had not been quite sincere.

Madeline set out on her walk with a light heart, which was not the less light that something of the merry thoughtlessness of childhood had left her for ever. It was not mere external attraction which could now give her pleasure. The loveliness of the scenery around Laneton, with the cottages peeping from amongst masses of trees; the sunshine glancing over the meadows; the blue mists upon the distant hills; the white, curling foam of the waves rolling in upon the shore; and the vast, illimitable sky seeming to embrace all earthly beauty in an atmosphere of purity, had now a deeper and a truer meaning than in former years she could see or understand; for these things were not merely pleasant to the eye—they were the signs of the love of God. Madeline's mind was just opening to the perception that religion adds tenfold to the enjoyment of life as it takes tenfold from its bitterness; the efforts so early made were bringing their reward; and even her duties, as they became habitual, began to be agreeable.

And the ways of religion are indeed ways of pleasantness: the yoke of Christ is indeed an easy yoke. No words were ever more true; but the 'ways' must be entered upon betimes—the 'yoke' must be submitted to in youth. It seems that one could pray for an angel's eloquence to persuade those who are just beginning life that it is so.

Once let them yield themselves to be the children of God in heart as well as by their baptismal privileges, and there is a clear, straight, sunshiny, though not cloudless path, marked out for them through the toils and dangers of the wilderness of life, to the rest of the blessed in Paradise. If any doubt, let them ask those who have gone before.

Who ever gave himself to God in the spring-time of life, and repented in the dreary winter of old age? Who ever looked back upon the years gone by, and grieved that they had been devoted to his Saviour? Who ever lay upon his death-bed, eternity opening before him, and the sentence of judgment awaiting him, and did not turn with thankfulness and love unutterable to the remembrance that, amidst all his manifold imperfections, he had been enabled, whilst his heart was yet untainted by grievous sin, to offer himself, his soul and body, to be 'a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice' to the Almighty Lord, by whose death he was redeemed?

Digitized by Google

Madeline Clifford was very happy. She knew that in one sense she could not remain so; since trouble must sooner or later come to her, as it comes to all. Still she was very happy; for if ever she thought of the future, she thought also of One who would never forsake her; and what trial could overwhelm her when He was with her?

That morning's walk was a thorough enjoyment to her; her business was soon settled, and a short distance farther brought her to the Manor lodge. No one was within except a little child, and Madeline, afraid of entrusting the book to her, considered it would be better, even at the risk of being late in returning, to carry it herself to the house. As she drew near, she caught sight of Alice, through the iron railing which separated the garden from the park, sauntering slowly up and down the terrace. Madeline called to her, and Alice's face brightened instantly, and hastening to the gate, she threw it open, and begged Madeline to join her.

'I have a book for Lady Catharine,' said Madeline: 'will you take it for her? I have no time to wait, for I have done scarcely anything this morning at home, and mamma will be vexed if I am not back soon.'

Alice laughed.

'Why, Madeline, one would think you were a baby in the school-room still. I thought you were out of all that particularity.'

'So I am,' answered Madeline, 'partly; but one wishes to please mamma just the same.'

'Such trifles cannot signify,' said Alice. 'You make yourself as badly off as I am. What do you think now of Lady Catharine's insisting upon my walking up and down here for an hour every morning?'

'That I wish you may never have anything more disagreeable to do,' replied Madeline, with a smile, as she gave the book to Alice, and wished her good-bye.

'Well! but tell me,' said Alice, detaining her; 'does your mamma treat you in the same way?'

'She wishes us to walk every morning, as you know,' replied Madeline; 'and we generally do before breakfast.'

'That is what Lady Catharine wants me to do,' said Alice; 'but it does not suit me; and then she worries so.'

Madeline had a strong inclination to stop and give Alice some good advice; but the church clock struck eleven.

Digitized by Google

'I must go,' she exclaimed. 'Alice, dear, will you let me say one thing? If you would just make up your mind to please Lady Catharine in these trifles, I think you would be happier. Good-bye —give me a kiss; I daresay we shall meet again by and by.'

Alice said 'Good-bye' in a tone of some annoyance, and could not forbear adding, 'You are so dreadfully particular and punctual, Madeline. When do you mean to get out of leading strings?'

'Never,' said Madeline, playfully, as she closed the garden gate, and once more nodding to Alice, set off on her walk home.

Alice looked wistfully after her; perplexing thoughts seemed working in her mind. She drew a note from her pocket, and stood gazing upon the direction with an air of irresolution. Presently, as if suddenly determined, she threw open the iron gate and ran after Madeline, who was proceeding leisurely through the park.

Madeline heard her footsteps without knowing who was behind her. She looked round a little startled.

'You walk so fast,' began Alice, nearly breathless with the haste she had made. 'I thought I never should reach you.'

'How tiresome of me!' exclaimed Madeline. 'Dear Alice, you are quite out of breath. What is it you want?'

'Nothing particular; only a trifle,' replied Alice, embarrassment succeeding to her former eagerness and irritation. 'Only just—will you take this letter to the post for me as you go by.'

'Yes, at least—to the post, did you say—it is not near post time.'

'I am quite aware of that; but will you take it? I want it to go. What are you afraid of?'

'Nothing,' exclaimed Madeline, a little impatiently. 'I am not afraid of anything.' Then, in a more subdued voice, she added, 'I do not mind taking this letter, or any letter, Alice; but I cannot think why you ask it.'

'I have a very good reason,' said Alice. 'There can be no harm in the letter: you see it is only to Florence Trevelyan.' As she said this, Alice held the direction for Madeline to see.

'Florence Trevelyan! there can be no harm, certainly; but, Alice, if you would not think me curious, I wish you could give me a reason for not sending the letter with the others.'

'Oh, I have a very simple reason, if that is what you want,' replied Alice, assuming an air of indifference. 'I cannot have Lady Catharine prying into my correspondence.'

Digitized by Google

'She sees your letters, then?'

'Yes, generally. There is no rule about it; but she remarks whom I write to, and rather complains if I send too many to the same person; and, in fact, I must be independent. So will you please just take my letter and put it into the post as you go by?'

Madeline made no answer. Alice held out the letter, but she did not take it.

'I thought you were immensely good-natured as well as strict,' said Alice.

'I should like to be good-natured—I wish to be,' answered Madeline, and the manner in which she spoke was so child-like and artless, that Alice could scarcely forbear smiling.

'Well, then, take my letter, like a darling.'

'But I would rather do right than be good-natured,' continued Madeline, with the same simplicity, and seeming to speak her thoughts aloud without reference to Alice's presence.

Alice looked back to the garden to be certain that she was not observed. 'Come, say yes or no; be quick, Maddy.'

'What I think, Alice,' answered Madeline, 'is that one ought not to set one's self up; I mean, one ought not to go against the persons one is with—do you see?'

'No; I see nothing, except that you are amazingly absurd and provoking,' exclaimed Alice.

'I would not be if I could help it, Alice; but somehow, I should not like to do anything Lady Catharine might not approve.'

'Really, Madeline, you are a complete baby. Do you think that at sixteen I am going to worry myself about every trifle, by considering whether Lady Catharine would approve? At that rate I might be tormenting myself all day long. She never approves of anything. She is as particular as—as'—Alice could find no satisfactory simile, and satisfied herself by adding, 'Juno!—it is a capital name for her. She is a complete Juno.'

'It is the particularity I am thinking of,' replied Madeline, taking no notice of the latter part of Alice's speech. 'If she is so particular'——

'What then? if she is so particular'——

'Why—you must not be angry, Alice—I don't think you can quite know better than Lady Catharine; and if she is like your mamma, it seems as if you ought to obey her. Please don't vex about the letter; I would do anything for you I could,

Digitized by Google

indeed I would; but I don't think this would be quite right.' Madeline once more said 'Good-bye,' and was walking homewards before Alice could tell what reply to make, or what argument or reproach to use.

Alice stood gazing after her, as with a light, elastic step, she went on, neither pausing nor looking behind her, neither turning to the right hand nor to the left; bent only on one purpose—reaching home in good time. Madeline's movements were entirely the index of her mind—free and firm, and yet child-like. They were quite different from Ruth's calmer, steadier, more thoughtful air. Alice, vexed though she was, could not help watching her with interest, in which was mingled a feeling of respect, as she threaded her way by short by-paths, amidst the intricacies of the trees, sometimes hidden, sometimes re-appearing, and at last becoming little more than a dark spot in the distance. Alice lost sight of her at last, and then she turned herself and went back to the house.

Lady Catharine met her at the iron gate. 'My dear, I thought my wish was that you should not go beyond the garden.'

'Madeline Clifford has just been here,' replied Alice, evading an excuse. 'She brought a book from the Parsonage.'

'Give it me, my love, at once; it may be of consequence.'

Alice's latent ill-temper was roused by Lady Catharine's tone of command and the half-implied reproach. She answered coldly that Madeline had not been gone many minutes, and giving the book to Lady Catharine, went to her room. Again the disappointed look might have been seen on Lady Catharine's face. She walked up and down the terrace buried in self-examination. What was her error in Alice's education? What mistake was she committing which could thus estrange her affection? or was Alice really cold and selfish? Was it possible that the child of the gentle, affectionate Mrs Lennox, could be insensible to all the love which was bestowed upon her? Perhaps she was too exacting, too particular; but this was only a passing fear. Lady Catharine had given up so many of her long-established habits, and had overcome so much of her natural precision in order not to be a restraint upon Alice, that it was difficult for her to imagine that anything of the kind which remained could really be galling. A different answer to the question suggested itself. Alice must need change and companionship of her own age. Ruth and Madeline could not be with her always, and

Digitized by Google

Ruth was too grave, and Madeline too child-like, perhaps, to suit her.

Lady Catharine disliked few things more than the idea of having the regularity of her household disturbed by an additional inmate, young and gay, and requiring amusement; yet, whilst Alice sat brooding over her fancied miseries, and tormenting herself with schemes for sending a private note to Florence Trevelyan, Lady Catharine was planning how she could arrange to receive and entertain a visitor—one of Alice's school friends, any one whom she might prefer, and whom Mrs Carter could recommend. She resolved to write to Mrs Carter by that day's post, and ask her opinion as to which of Alice's former companions it would be preferable to have. Florence Trevelyan might have been asked at once, but Alice appeared to have taken so little interest in her, that it seemed scarcely probable she would like it, and Lady Catharine put her aside as not to be thought of.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RUTH was disappointed in her hope of seeing Alice for two days. She had therefore full leisure to think over her last conversation and all that had passed between them. That Ruth had influence was clear; and she had also a sincere desire to exercise this influence rightly. Alice's increased interest in the school and the poor people were hopeful symptoms; but no external improvement could really avail for her happiness as long as her position with regard to Lady Catharine remained as it then was. Here lay the great difficulty both for Alice's conduct and Ruth's advice. Mrs Clifford would have been the fit person to apply to when Ruth wished to know how to deal with Alice; but Ruth was involved in a harassing maze of petty perplexities. She could not pretend to talk openly to her mother about Alice, and yet be a party to deceptions. But neither could she own her share in them, because this would involve a mention of Florence and Justine; and perhaps, as Alice had said, do harm. Ruth had a strong mind, which could cope with serious evils; she had moral courage sufficient to have enabled her to make really great efforts, and she had a clear judgment in general; but the present seemed a case distinct from all others. There

Digitized by Google

was a consciousness of being wrong, without any exact perception of where the wrong lay; a wish to free herself from Alice, yet a strong desire to lead her right; a dislike to being mixed up in any affair with Florence and Justine, yet a dread that if Alice were to continue the acquaintance whilst she withdrew from it, the result might do great mischief. Above all, a hatred of deception and concealment, yet the tie of a hasty promise, given, she scarcely knew why or for what. It was the most worrying, provoking medley of small difficulties which Ruth had ever met with.

Still, if she really could guide Alice at all, it should be, she determined, in the path of sincerity: the mystery about Justine must either be cleared up, or they must be released from their promise. This step was undoubtedly one of the first to be taken, and Ruth became quite anxious either to meet Florence, or to make Alice agree to write to her; or, in short, do something to put an end to the necessity for concealment.

Alice's disposition was changeable as the winds. Before Lady Catharine received Mrs Carter's answer to her letter, she had taken, what is called, a good turn—at least, in some respects. The poor people's clothes and some books of accounts were sent from the Parsonage, and she busied herself one whole morning in arranging what was to be done with them; and even consulted Lady Catharine as to how she should manage to receive the pence for the shoe club, and what day and hour it would be well to fix for it. Lady Catharine was thankful for the improvement, but it was only external. As regarded herself—her own thoughts, or wishes, or feelings—Alice was as little inclined to be communicative as ever.

Mrs Carter's letter, therefore, was very welcome when it arrived at the usual time, the breakfast hour; for Lady Catharine flattered herself, that she was now to find an easy way out of her difficulties. But, like many other 'short cuts' in life, the plan of providing Alice with a friend only led further away from the main object. Mrs Carter professed herself much perplexed what answer to give to Lady Catharine's request. In the multiplicity of her engagements, she could not always bear in mind the friendships which her young people formed with each other. She was not at all aware that either Fanny Wilson or Jessie O'Neile were particularly intimate with Alice. Indeed, to the best of her recollection, the only person whom Alice had lately expressed much regard for, was Florence Tre-

Digitized by Google

velyan; but of this she could not be certain. She would not, however, neglect the opportunity of giving Lady Catharine a warning upon the subject, which she was sure would not be taken amiss. And this warning made Lady Catharine knit her brows and look doubly stern, as she pushed aside her plate, and removed her coffee cup, and seemed determined to give it her full attention; whilst Alice sat opposite, wondering what Mrs Carter, whose handwriting she recognised, could possibly have to write about.

The passage which so engrossed Lady Catharine was the following: 'I cannot help fearing lest, by any means, Alice's intimacy with Florence should lead to the renewal of an acquaintance with another young person, whose name you may perhaps recollect, Mademoiselle Le Vergnier. She was at one time admitted frequently as a guest at my house. I then saw reason to distrust her principles, and for the sake of my pupils I was compelled to forbid her ever associating with them again. Still I had an interest in her; she was very young, and her education had been much neglected. All her prospects depended upon being able to support herself as a governess; and as she had been specially recommended to my care, I could not at once, for what might be considered a trifling offence, give her up. I will not trouble you with mentioning the means I took to watch over and help her; it will be sufficent to say that I never lost sight of her, and from time to time gave her advice as to her conduct, besides other assistance. I had reason to hope that my efforts would not be thrown away, and I looked forward to procuring some situation for her where she might be independent and respected. But some circumstances which have lately come to my knowledge have given me a very unfavourable impression regarding her. I fear the careless education which she received as a child is working its fatal consequences, now that she is a woman. I could not possibly recommend her as a governess, and it would grieve me sincerely to know that any of my pupils were intimate with her.

'You will not, I hope, consider me prejudiced or unjust because I do not enter into particulars. I do not feel myself at liberty to give more than a general warning; but when I heard that Florence Trevelyan had been allowed to renew the acquaintance, notwithstanding a caution, similar to this, sent both to her mother and herself, I could not help feeling anxious respecting Alice. Mademoiselle Le Vergnier has lately been resi-

Digitized by Google

dent in the neighbourhood of Cromer Court. I am not sure where she now is. With regard to Florence, I have not a bad opinion of her. I even consider that, under good influence, she might do well; but she is extremely weak and very vain, and one cannot tell what the effect of Justine's acquaintance may be. It is a real grief to me that her parents have allowed an intimacy to grow up again.'

A hasty person would at once have addressed Alice upon the subject of this letter, but Lady Catharine was seldom or never hasty. She finished breakfast with great deliberation, gave her orders for the day, and then went into the garden—her usual place for meditation. Alice hoped that nothing was wrong, and settled herself to her occupations in the morning-room. There was nothing very wrong yet, at least in the way of suspicion. Lady Catharine's disposition was guileless; she did not imagine that Alice would deceive her, and therefore took it for granted that Mrs Carter was mistaken when she supposed that Florence and Alice were friends. All that vexed her was to be obliged in any way to check the acquaintance with Florence, who, as the daughter of persons once well known to her, had, she conceived, a claim upon her for kindness. The question which she could not at once decide was, whether she should mention to Alice what Mrs Carter had said.

The natural thing to be done in a case of difficulty is to ask another's opinion; but this was exactly what Lady Catharine never would do. She was the lady paramount in her own household and upon her own large estate; and though humble in her opinion of herself, as all true Christians must be, she nevertheless had an unobtrusive but firm reliance upon her own judgment, which made it seem unnecessary to ask advice. Besides, Mrs Clifford was the only person whom she could well consult, and Mrs Clifford, with all her excellences—and Lady Catharine thought herself fully alive to them—did not hold that position in her estimation which would fit her to be her counsellor. She was too gentle—too quiet; her management was not systematic; or, at any rate, it did not appear to be so. Lady Catharine, in her secret heart, believed that it was by a sort of happy accident—if such a term may be allowed—that Ruth and Madeline had grown up to be superior to other girls of their age. It was the unseen influence of religious principle, she supposed, acting by itself upon dispositions naturally good, and kept aloof from temptation. She could not understand a

Digitized by Google

family in which the authority of the mother and the mistress was not prominently put forward. Mrs Clifford, on her side, respected Lady Catharine extremely, but she was rather afraid of her. Lady Catharine's strong will went straight forward, like the course of a railroad, cutting down hills of difficulty, and filling up valleys of perplexity, and gaining its end surely and rapidly; but never perceiving that it was all the time intruding upon private feeling, or invading some quiet little nook of home affections. Mrs Clifford felt this constantly, and she would have been just as unwilling to give advice to Lady Catharine as Lady Catharine would be to ask it. Lady Catharine came to her own decision at length; she would be silent for the present. Mrs Carter was evidently mistaken in thinking that Alice cared for Florence, and it might be more charitable to Justine not to say anything about her until there was a necessity. In the meantime she could be on the watch herself, and check any great friendship if it appeared likely to spring up. For the sake of her old friends, it would not do to discourage the acquaintance entirely; and, indeed, Mrs Carter's observations did not seem to render it necessary.

When Lady Catharine went to Alice's room, she referred again to her school friends, and proposed, if she liked it, to invite either Fanny Wilson or Jessie O'Neile to the Manor. Alice's answer was discouraging. She was very much obliged; but she did not care. If Lady Catharine liked.

'If I like, my dear; that is not at all the point: it is what you like.'

'Thank you, ma'am;' but Alice would not appear glad.

A slight misgiving crossed Lady Catharine's mind. 'You are very strange, my dear,' she said. 'You don't seem half as much pleased as you were the other day, when you told me you had met Miss Trevelyan at Redford.'

'Don't I, ma'am?' said Alice, blushing, but going on with her occupation.

'No, my dear, you don't. Do you really not care to have your friends to see you?'

'I shall like it by and by,' said Alice, not knowing how to avoid a direct answer.

'Well! by and by; perhaps you are right; you are scarcely settled in your ways of going on yet. I am glad you are diligent at that work; you will have finished the seams today.'

Digitized by Google

'Yes, I hope so,' said Alice, rejoiced to have escaped the dangerous topic.

'Neatly done, too,' said Lady Catharine, examining it. 'I must go now; I have letters to write. Good-bye, my love, till luncheon-time;' and Lady Catharine went away, pleased at being freed for a time, without any sacrifice of duty, from the necessity of entertaining a strange young lady. She came back, however; the misgiving in her mind was not entirely gone. 'You have seen but little of Miss Trevelyan, my dear Alice. I suppose she has never mentioned to you anything about a friend of hers, a Mademoiselle Le Vergnier?'

'I know Justine myself,' said Alice.

'Yes, yes, I am aware of that; but I thought Miss Trevelyan knew her too.'

'When we were at Mrs Carter's, a long time ago,' said Alice.

'Oh!' Lady Catharine was quite satisfied, and fancied she had managed cleverly to discover that Alice knew nothing of Florence or Justine, or anything concerning them.

Alice was quite dissatisfied. Those few observations had opened to her, in a great measure, the purport of Mrs Carter's letter.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

RUTH went to the Manor that afternoon. She found Lady Catharine in Alice's apartment, helping her to arrange some books which had just come from London. Alice was in good humour, and Lady Catharine pleased with her pleasure. This was so much in Ruth's favour, for Alice was more likely to take a right view of things when she was contented than when she was perverse.

'Now, Ruth,' said Lady Catharine, in her kindest voice, 'we must have your assistance. Here are some histories; they had better go before the Waverley Novels.'

'The Waverley Novels!' and Ruth laid her hand upon them eagerly. 'O Alice! how delightful! are they all your own?'

'All her own,' replied Lady Catharine, smiling at Ruth's forgetfulness of the observation she had addressed to her. 'But,'

Digitized by Google

she added, 'Alice assures me they shall not be her only reading. The histories are to be studied carefully; and the Waverley Novels are to be the recreation. For myself, I never read novels at all,' continued Lady Catharine, in a lower tone. 'I don't see the interest in them: however, with young people, I suppose it is different. There were not many good novels when I was young.'

Ruth and Alice were now looking over the books together; pointing out to each other which they had read, and recalling the particular passages and characters they liked.

When, however, Lady Catharine left them, which she did very soon, Ruth threw aside her volume, and exclaimed—

'How I have wished to see you, Alice, the last three days.'

'And so have I been wishing to see you,' replied Alice. 'I should have managed it the day before yesterday, only it rained; and yesterday Lady Catharine took me out in her carriage.'

'I have been very uncomfortable since I saw you last,' continued Ruth.

'About that stupid note? It is stupid, is it not? Florence really must not write in such a very affectionate way—and hinting about Justine too!—so extremely imprudent!'

'And what is more,' continued Ruth, 'Florence must not have anything to do with Justine; or, if she has, she must not mix you up with it.'

'As to that,' replied Alice, 'I know no harm of Justine; Florence tells me she is very well disposed.'

'And, besides, from what you have said,' observed Ruth, 'I am sure your acquaintance with Florence is kept up in some way without Lady Catharine's knowledge.'

'Is Lady Catharine always to interfere with me?' inquired Alice, proudly. 'Am I never to have a friend of my own choosing?'

'Whilst you are living with Lady Catharine, you are bound to follow her wishes,' said Ruth; 'and to be open with her.'

'So I would be; but I am afraid of her.'

'That may be a difficulty,' replied Ruth; 'but it does not alter the duty.'

'And what would you have me to do, then?' inquired Alice, struck with Ruth's determined tone.

'Write to Florence, and say that you must tell Lady Catharine how intimate you are.'

'Oh! but you mistake entirely: it is my own fault Lady

Digitized by Google

Catharine's not understanding that she is my friend. Florence has nothing to do with it; and really the affair is scarcely worth speaking of, only it perplexes one just now. I hope you will try and understand, Ruth,' continued Alice, after a moment's pause. 'You will not think I mean to be insincere; but the fact is, Lady Catharine worries me immensely, and I knew she would not like Florence—at least, I thought she would not; and when she asked who were my friends at school, I did not mention her particularly; and so Lady Catharine has taken up a fancy that I do not care about her—that Fanny Wilson and Jessie O'Neile were my favourites; and, moreover—I don't much like telling you, because you take matters so seriously, but I suppose I had better—one day there came a letter from Florence—a formal one, just such as she writes when she is stupid—and I did not mind showing that; but there was a postscript, much warmer, calling me "darling," and all that sort of thing, and this I was afraid to show; so I gave Lady Catharine the letter, and kept the postscript, and ever since she has taken it into her head, I am sure, that Florence always writes to me in that dull way, and she would not at all comprehend the style of these last notes.'

Ruth was silent when Alice had finished this confession, which was made in a hurried voice, and with downcast eyes. Alice waited patiently for an answer. When it came, it was very short, and not at all consolatory.

'Alice, Mrs Carter always said your great fault was deficiency in moral courage.'

'Yes, I know it—I know it perfectly,' answered Alice; 'but that will not help me now.'

'It ought to help you,' said Ruth, 'because you ought to strive against it.'

'And I mean to do so; I trust and think that I shall. Only let me get rid of this one difficulty.'

'You create the difficulties for yourself, Alice,' answered Ruth; 'and unless you have moral courage now, neither I nor any one else can be of use to you. You must tell Lady Catharine what you have done.'

'I tell her!' and Alice almost screamed with horror.

'Yes, it is the only way,' said Ruth, unrelentingly.

Alice turned very pale; then, after a moment's thought, she said—

'No, Ruth, it is not the only way;—in fact, I cannot do it;

Digitized by Google

—for, of course, if I tell one thing, I must tell all. It would be merely pretence to keep back anything; and what is to be done then about Justine?—we have both promised to be secret there.'

Ruth was silent, for she was perplexed.

'Then write to Florence,' she said, after a little thought; 'tell her that you would rather not keep up a correspondence with her, as there are subjects which cannot be mentioned to Lady Catharine, and so break off the acquaintance—for the present, at least; and you may beg her to release us from our promise at the same time. In fact, as far as I am concerned, I am scarcely bound by it—for I only made it for a time.'

'And how is this precious letter to be sent when it is written?'

'As all other letters are, I suppose,' replied Ruth.

'And if Lady Catharine asks to see it?'

Ruth was again obliged to consider.

'You must tell the truth,' she replied: 'say that you have written something private to Florence. Lady Catharine is much too honourable to insist upon seeing it, however annoyed she may be; and depend upon it, Alice,' continued Ruth, earnestly, 'if you will do this, you will go further in gaining Lady Catharine's esteem, and making your life happy, than you can possibly imagine.'

Alice leaned her head upon her hand, and thought; and Ruth busied herself with the books, that no fault might be laid upon them when Lady Catharine returned. Alice looked up at last.

'Ruth,' she said, 'if Lady Catharine were any one else, I could do it; but you don't know her. I can't tell you what it is like when she is offended. She never scolds, but it is something awful—a thunder-cloud is nothing to it;—so black and quiet, only you are sure there must be a burst before long. And then her voice goes deep down with a rumble, and she has a fashion of smoothing her mittens; when she begins that, I know it is all over with me.'

Alice paused; the small amount of courage which she possessed before she commenced her description had now completely melted away.

'You must think of another plan,' she continued; 'I can't stand thundering looks.'

'Or seeing Lady Catharine smooth her mittens,' said Ruth, ironically. 'O Alice!'

Digitized by Google

'It is very well for you to say "O Alice!" but you will not be put in the way of it.'

'What I say is right, nevertheless,' persisted Ruth.

'Well! yes, perhaps it is.'

'Then it must be done.'

Alice was silent.

'Think, Alice,' continued Ruth; 'now you are to be confirmed, you ought to be so very particular.'

'Confirmed!' exclaimed Alice. 'I wish'—— she stopped.

'You wish what?' asked Ruth.

'I had better keep my wishes to myself,' replied Alice; 'I shall only frighten you. By the by, Ruth, are we to have regular examination days now? Your papa said something about it.'

'Yes: I thought you understood it; twice a week, to begin to-morrow.'

Alice looked anything but pleased, and Ruth resolutely returned to the former subject.

'You see, Alice,' she said, 'this is a time of all others when you should be careful. You would not bear to promise to be good, and all the time to be deceiving Lady Catharine. I do hope you will take my advice.'

'I mean to do so always, after this time,' said Alice.

'But that will not do; now is the time; really it is right.'

Alice put on a mysterious expression of face, and said she could not be sure of that.

'But I am, quite,' replied Ruth.

'Yes; but you don't know. Suppose, by telling Lady Catharine, or by making her suspicious—which she would be horribly—if she knew I wrote private things to Florence—great mischief was to follow for another person.'

'I don't understand—I can't tell what you are talking about,' replied Ruth. 'I only see the straightforward right of the case.'

'Ah! yes; but if I were to explain—there are some things, Ruth, which you are not up to.'

'A great many, I hope,' said Ruth, proudly, 'if you are talking of Florence and Justine.'

'That is so like you, Ruth; setting them both down as very bad now, because they were silly years ago. But there is nothing silly in this business: it is very important, especially to Justine. I wish I could tell you. However, you will know

Digitized by Google

soon enough if things turn out as we wish. Florence really is amazingly good-natured to take such an interest in Justine.'

Ruth could not help being curious. Her mind wandered away from the real subject under discussion, whilst trying to give a form to the conjectures which crossed her mind.

'I know—I have guessed,' she presently exclaimed. 'Mamma heard the other day that Mrs De Lacy was looking out for a governess for little Agnes. Florence wishes Justine to have the situation; that is it. I don't ask you to tell, but I am sure it is. I suppose she would not like the old stories to be brought up against her. But it seems to me absurd to make a mystery of things so long past, and Mrs De Lacy must find out somehow that Mrs Carter knows Justine.'

'Mrs De Lacy is going abroad almost immediately,' said Alice.

Ruth smiled at this indirect confirmation of her suspicion.

'And Justine is to go with her?' she said.

'And perhaps Florence,' added Alice; then recollecting herself, she exclaimed: 'How stupid in me! I did not mean in the least to tell.'

'Only you have done so. You never could keep a secret.'

Alice appeared disconcerted for the instant, but there was relief in the thought that Ruth now knew something of the true state of the case.

'Still, I cannot comprehend it,' continued Ruth. 'Mrs Carter is a very kind, charitable person. She would not say anything against Justine if she could help it.'

'Mrs Carter is prejudiced,' replied Alice.

'But how prejudiced? Has she made up her mind that because Justine was not perfectly good years ago, therefore she is to be wicked all the days of her life?'

'Mrs Carter says unjust things about her, and believes a great many false stories,' said Alice.

'Oh!' and Ruth's face brightened with intelligence, 'I comprehend better now; they are new stories, which Florence is afraid of.'

'New, but not true,' said Alice. 'Florence told me all about it. Justine's last situation was a very strict one, and she was never allowed to go out or see her friends; and Mrs Carter, and persons who don't like her, declare that she used to do so by stealth, but it was not at all the case. Justine explained it to Florence very satisfactorily, and since then Florence has taken

Digitized by Google

her part. As for Mrs Carter, she is quite Justine's enemy, and I suspect she has even written something about her to Lady Catharine.' Alice then related what had passed in the morning. 'Florence told me that even Mary Vernon has interfered about her,' she added, 'saying ill-natured things.'

'Mrs Carter and Mary Vernon!' exclaimed Ruth; 'I would believe what they said against all the Florence Trevelyans in the world. I shall write to Mary and ask her what the truth is.'

'No, no; indeed, Ruth, you must not. Remember, we have promised to be quiet; and, in fact, I ought not to have told you this, only you guessed. In fairness to me you must not make a fuss.'

'But it is so wrong in Florence,' said Ruth, 'setting up her judgment! And if Justine is really not a good person, it will be very sad for her to be governess to that child. I wonder why you don't see that.'

'Florence declares she is good,' persisted Alice.

'But how can Florence know better than such persons as Mrs Carter and Mary Vernon? Indeed, she is quite wrong.'

'Then write and tell her so,' said Alice, eagerly.

'I!—I write?'

'Yes, you have influence; she respects you immensely. Tell her how you came to know about the affair, and advise her to have nothing to do with it. She will listen to you.'

'No,' exclaimed Ruth, 'Florence will not do that; she will listen to nothing but her own wishes.'

'Ruth,' said Alice, 'I know Florence much better than you do; she will listen to you.'

Ruth became very thoughtful.

'I cannot mix myself up with the affair,' she said.

'But you are mixed up with it; remember your promise.'

'It was given only for a short time; I shall let Florence know the next time we meet that I consider myself released from it; and then the matter must take its own course. If I am asked anything about Justine, I shall tell what I know.'

Alice grew uneasy, and said it was a very perplexing business.

'I do not see that,' replied Ruth; 'we have but one thing to do—to get out of it.'

'Much easier said than done—at least for me,' observed Alice; 'and, moreover, I cannot see that it is best.

Digitized by Google

'It is the simplest, most straightforward course,' replied Ruth.

'Well, it may be,' answered Alice, doubtfully. 'You are much better and wiser than I am, Ruth; but really, in this case, I do think you are mistaken. Just consider; if it is so very bad for Justine to be governess to Agnes when she is not fit for the situation, surely it would be proper to warn Florence against encouraging her. You may do immense good if you will only write, and you may tell Florence not to send me any more affectionate letters, which I cannot show to Lady Catharine, and so prevent me from getting into disgrace.'

Alice had, by this time, completely deceived herself. She really did think that she was giving a disinterested opinion when she was urging Ruth to do that which would best suit her own convenience. Ruth again brought forward, though rather feebly, her opinion of the uselessness of interference, and Alice strongly combated it, and reiterated again and again her conviction that the profound respect which Florence entertained for Ruth would lead her to be entirely guided by her.

'If I could think so,' said Ruth, hesitating.

'But you may be quite sure of it; you may be of use to Florence, and possibly to Justine too. Both of them look up to you.'

Ruth smiled at the notion of a person like Justine looking up to her; but the idea had its effect.

'And,' continued Alice, 'your writing will stop Florence from sending those foolish affectionate notes just as much as mine; but nothing which I could say would prevent her from encouraging Justine, don't you see?'

Alice had mixed up the two questions adroitly, though without any deliberate intention, and Ruth's usually clear judgment was at fault. She lost sight of her first wish of inducing Alice to be open with Lady Catharine, and began to imagine that the important point was to persuade Florence that she was doing wrong in taking Justine's part.

'I will think about it,' she said in reply to Alice's pleading.

'If you think, you will do it,' was the answer: one which made Ruth shrink with a sudden misgiving, as to whether she was deciding aright. Alice used the expression without any double meaning; it was merely her way of saying that she was certain Ruth would agree.

Digitized by Google

'I know you will, because it is best, and kindest,' she added. 'You are more reasonable than Madeline.'

'Madeline knows nothing!' exclaimed Ruth.

'No; only I meant to have told you—the other day—I had written a note to Florence—much such a one as you will send in one respect, begging her not to call me "darling, and dearest;" and I asked Madeline to put it in the post for me and she refused.'

'You never told me that before,' said Ruth, reproachfully.

'Because I did not think of it. I was angry with Madeline at the time, but I forgot it afterwards.'

'And Madeline refused?' repeated Ruth, in a tone of uneasiness.

Alice answered with some surprise:—

'Yes, she refused: but why should you be so grave about it?'

'Madeline thought it wrong, I suppose,' continued Ruth.

'I don't know about wrong exactly; that is such a hard word, but not quite right. "She had rather not," she said; and when Madeline talks about rather not, I can never ask her a second time.'

'Good-bye, Alice,' said Ruth, abruptly; and fastening the strings of her bonnet in haste.

'Good-bye, Ruth, dear; remember, I depend upon you, and you must write soon, or it will be no good.'

Ruth's letter to Florence *was* written that same afternoon. Any one in the least acquainted with human nature, especially with a character like Ruth's, might have prophesied that it would be.

Ruth piqued herself upon her good judgment; but a good judgment, in questions of right and wrong, is not that which can calculate consequences cleverly, but that which perceives the duty of the case and determines at once to perform it. Its main ingredient is more than a wish not to do wrong; it is an earnest desire to do right. Ruth had two duties incumbent upon her; one to her mother not to engage in a correspondence which she might disapprove; the other to Alice, not in any way to encourage her in deceiving Lady Catharine. These two duties Ruth set aside, and took up a third; the endeavour to make Florence Trevelyan give up Justine.

Alice's allusion to Madeline was the only thing which caused her to question the propriety of what she was doing. Ruth was

Digitized by Google

nearly certain, though she would scarcely allow it to herself, that Madeline would not take the same view of the case that she did. But Madeline was young, even for her age; and singularly quick too in settling all doubtful questions. Ruth was accustomed to consider her sister's opinions as inferior to her own when they differed in argument. She herself was very clever; her perception was keen, and she seemed able to see both sides of the question at once. Whichever view she took, appeared, for the time, the right one; yet, after long reasoning, Madeline would often surprise her by ending with—'It seems right, Ruth, because you say it; but, somehow, I cannot feel that it is so;' and then she would return to the very point from which they had started, and propound some simple question of duty, which put all Ruth's cleverness to flight. Experience, in these cases, often showed Ruth that Madeline was right, but she attributed the fact to accident.

The doubt, in the present instance, as to what Madeline would do in a similar case, made Ruth uncomfortable, but it did not alter her decision. As Alice had prophesied, she thought; and then she resolved to act.

The letter, when written, was read over with considerable satisfaction, for it was well expressed, simple, and forcible. Ruth made many apologies for intruding her opinion, and trusted that Florence would not be vexed at her having discovered the purport of Justine's visit; and then she gave the reasons which made her think that it would not be right to conceal Justine's acquaintance with Mrs Carter, speaking strongly of the mischief which might ensue if Justine were not a proper person to take charge of Agnes. As regarded herself, she stated that she could not consider her promise as any longer binding, for it was made before she knew the facts of the case; and when it was given she had said it could only be for a time. In conclusion, she mentioned that Alice did not like to receive notes which could not be shown to Lady Catharine, and therefore begged Florence not to write to her about Justine, and to use less affectionate expressions.

This last sentence did not imply all that Ruth intended when she talked to Alice. It left the door open for the intimacy with Florence still to continue in a covert way, but she did not exactly know what else to say without giving offence, and thought that it would do for the present. Florence was not going to live in the neighbourhood, so perhaps there was no great mischief

Digitized by Google

in letting things take their chance for a few weeks. In fact, she and Alice were in a manner one in this business, and if they were cut off from Florence entirely, it would of course be impossible to be of any use to her. So the letter was sent, and Ruth looked forward with much interest to the answer.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ALICE was more competent to perform her duties at the school after receiving Ruth's advice and hints. She was also happier after having acknowledged her deception, and determined to have no more letters which she was afraid to show. She began to fancy that she really was, as the expression is, turning over a new leaf. But Alice was mistaken. We cannot slur over a duty, and go on well without performing it. If there is any act which we ought to do and which we will not do, it is in vain to flatter ourselves that we are sincere in our amendment.

Alice's concealment from Lady Catharine of her friendship with Florence Trevelyan was like an unpaid debt. Her accounts might be settled regularly for the future, but until the old claim was discharged, she could not be free and honourable. There were times when Alice felt this—when a pang shot through her heart—a pang which all must sometimes feel who endeavour to blind themselves by an outward change of conduct without seeking the conversion of the heart. These times were whenever any allusion was made to the confirmation.

Alice could not bring herself to bear the prospect of it. As it approached nearer, it became more serious—it may, indeed, be said, more awful; for upon confirmation must immediately follow that holiest of Christian privileges, which the most indifferent shrink from approaching unprepared.

This was a subject rarely alluded to by Lady Catharine, who considered that if Alice was fit for confirmation, she must be fit to be admitted to the Holy Communion, and trusted much to her late improvement; not doubting, also, that Alice's serious impressions would be deepened by Mr Clifford's instruction and advice.

Perhaps, had Lady Catharine remarked the manner in which

Digitized by Google

Mrs Clifford would occasionally allude, in conversation with her children, to the solemn time that was approaching, she might have received a useful hint as to her treatment of Alice. Lady Catharine had a great dislike to enthusiastic expressions, and found it difficult to say what she felt upon religious subjects; she therefore took refuge in silence. Mrs Clifford's taste was very like Lady Catharine's; but when, in answer to Madeline's simple observation, 'Mamma, I shall not feel a child any longer when I am confirmed,' her mother answered in a manner so serious that it could not be misunderstood, 'And you will not be a child, my love,' both Madeline and Ruth knew at once what it was to which reference was made. Volumes of instruction would not have made more impression upon them than the belief which their mother indirectly but constantly showed, that they were approaching a period when a blessing, which human language cannot describe, was to be conferred upon them.

Long before, indeed, they could have told in words the nature of the Holy Sacrament to which they were to be admitted; but words too often are a hindrance rather than an assistance to our feelings, and preparation for a first Communion is something widely different from the weekly repetition of the explanation of the subject given in the Church Catechism.

So Madeline felt as she was spending some time alone, a few days after Ruth had sent her letter to Florence. She was trying to examine her own heart; trying to discover her faults; trying to realise her true condition upon earth, and the state of her preparation for heaven. A little book upon self-examination lay open before her. It contained but few questions; and those, it would have seemed, soon answered. But each question suggested to Madeline's true and most conscientious mind subject for reflection and deep regret. The life which to others appeared unspotted, was, when viewed in the presence of God, stained with innumerable sins.

But Madeline would not shrink from the sight. One by one, the faults of which she was conscious from former self-examination were enumerated and confessed, with a fervent prayer for forgiveness and help; and then, the particular point upon which she had fixed for that day's inquiry was dwelt upon more minutely. It was vanity—a fault which Madeline saw in herself, although those who knew her best would have hesitated to acknowledge that she had it. She was vain of her

Digitized by Google

personal appearance, and she began her self-imposed task by examining in what details this defect showed itself. Too much time, she knew, was spent in dressing: that was one sign; she was too particular in choosing her dresses; too anxious to hear remarks made upon herself and Ruth, which indirectly paid them compliments; she always observed carefully what other persons wore, and how it was put on; she was not pleased when others were called pretty: that approached to envy; but the groundwork was vanity. These things were indeed in themselves slight; but they were indications of a temper of mind to be guarded against, and Madeline had learned to look, not at her outward conduct only, but at her heart. When the offence was thus thoroughly perceived and acknowledged, the next step of importance was to see it in its true light—in its real deformity; to view it as it must be viewed by God. Madeline was vain of her appearance and fond of admiration in general; yet, in a few years (so she had been taught always to carry on her thoughts to the end of life) her body must be laid in the grave, an object of dread to those who most loved her, with the worm spread under her, and the worm covering her. Where would then be room for vanity?

She thought once more:—there was a world, sinless and glorious, where saints cast their crowns of glory at the foot of the throne of God, and angels cover their faces with their wings in awful adoration of his majesty. Madeline tried but for a few moments to imagine what that world must be. She read of it in the Bible, and strove to bring before the eye of her mind some faint perception of its awfulness. She imagined herself standing amongst the hosts of heaven; she, the ignorant, and weak, and vain—how would they feel towards her? how would they bear her presence? More than all, how would her merciful Saviour regard her? The holy and undefiled, how could He look upon the guilty? Vanity in heaven! Even to connect the ideas seemed a profanation. No, it must be striven against—crushed, uprooted. Were it to cost the labour of a life, and the watchfulness of every hour, still it must be conquered. Amongst the many sacrifices of pleasant sins to be made at the altar of her Saviour, vanity must unhesitatingly be numbered.

The consciousness of perfect sincerity, blended with the depth of Madeline's repentance and humility and with the confidence of a child asking help from a father, and the simple, reverent love of a sister trusting to an elder brother, she knelt once more

Digitized by Google

in prayer, and felt that prayer was happiness. Then, as she rose to return to her usual employments, she dwelt for a few moments longer upon the probable temptations which would be awaiting her, especially with regard to this one fault. It was not often that she left her room without casting one look in her glass, as much from habit, perhaps, as from vanity. Now she turned away, not because it would be wrong to look, but because it was the first little opportunity which presented itself of proving her own sincerity; and the trifling act, scarcely to be termed self-denial, was the seal of her resolution, and the earnest of future victories.

Ruth spent some time, also, that day, in self-examination; but she could not fix her mind like Madeline. The expectation of the answer from Florence Trevelyan was constantly recurring to her; and she found herself repeating the very words in which she supposed Florence would express a willingness to be entirely guided by her. It was rather surprising that she had not heard before; and an uncomfortable feeling arose at the thought that, for the first time, she should receive a letter which she must ask her mother not to read. Still Ruth began the task which she had imposed upon herself without being exactly conscious of what is called unreality; or, in other words, without seeing that she was keeping back from any known duty.

Ruth's mode of self-examination differed from Madeline's. It had respect for the future more than the past. When persons have long accustomed themselves to strictness of life, this may be a desirable mode of striving to improve. It is not well to think too much about our own minds, or even about our motives. It is better to dwell upon our Saviour's infinite love, and our own privileges as members of His Church; and then to try and show our gratitude by thinking of all we can do to please Him. But, at certain times, especially whilst we are as yet unacquainted with our own dispositions, and must endeavour to become thoroughly humbled as a preparation for the Holy Communion, it is absolutely necessary to examine our consciences very closely; to look back upon the past, that we may learn to guard against the future. Ruth thought she had done this, because on a former occasion she had read through and answered a certain set of questions, and now, like Madeline, she chose, as her papa had recommended, one particular fault to guard against. Madeline, as we have seen, began by a careful inquiry as to the little ways in which her defects showed them-

Digitized by Google

selves. Ruth, on the contrary, was satisfied with knowing, partly from having been told, and partly from her own conscience, that she had certain faults, and there the inquiry rested. Her self-examination was vague: what was gone by was in a manner forgotten; and her character was, in consequence, never truly viewed. So, in the present instance, self-conceit in general was, she well knew, what she had to struggle against; and she resolved not to speak of herself, not to put forward her opinion more than could be helped; to remember generally that self-conceit was wrong: and they were very good resolutions; but if we do not know the instances in which we have before failed we cannot tell what we are bound to guard against. Neither were they resolutions founded upon Christian humility—a heathen might have made them. There was no remembrance of the lowliness of the Saviour of the world, no consideration of His perfect purity, no real desire to be humble, because so she might be like Him. Ruth strove against her faults more because they lowered her in the eyes of her fellow-creatures, than because they were hateful in the eye of God; and when we look at our sins only in this way we never have a true view of them. Nothing will give us a real feeling of unworthiness, but the consideration of our Saviour's perfection and yet of His unspeakable love; and nothing will really enable us thoroughly to root out sin except the wish to please Him, as we would wish to please our parents, and the certainty that He will accept the very least endeavour, and forgive our fallings away, even until seventy times seven.

Madeline's efforts were a pleasure, Ruth's were a burden; yet Madeline had a much greater sense of her own helplessness and guilt than her sister. The one thought of her Saviour, the other of herself.

Madeline returned to the duties of her daily life with the feeling of love urging her to watchfulness and energy. Ruth returned to hers with the thought that she had done what was right, and was, therefore, better prepared for confirmation and the Holy Communion.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XL.

MRS CLIFFORD was sitting in the school-room the next morning, whilst Ruth and Madeline were pursuing their usual studies. Ruth was painfully conscious of her mother's presence, and this feeling was quite new to her. For the last year, or even more, any sense of restraint with her mamma had been wearing off. Mrs Clifford, notwithstanding her extreme gentleness of temper, exercised a full authority over her children when they were little. Even a look of disobedience was noticed, if not punished. Ruth and Madeline would no more have ventured to disobey their mother than their father. They could not recollect the time when they had been permitted to follow their own will, and obedience, in consequence, had become as much a habit as the common course of their daily life.

When this principle was once firmly fixed, half the difficulty of education was over. Mrs Clifford could afford to be indulgent, because she had no fear of rebellion. She could overlook many little faults which it might have fretted her children's temper to remark,—faults shown in play hours—when they were off their guard,—when they were evidently not aware that she was near, because she knew that the great principle of duty was thoroughly rooted; and that, by degrees, if only she could have patience, it would work out its good effects in every little detail.

Ruth and Madeline scarcely knew how much they were under control, even when they were children; they were like well-trained horses, taught to attend so immediately to the slightest check, that the curb was unnecessary; and now that they were approaching an age when they might be expected to have judgment and wills of their own, even the restraints of childhood were gradually loosened.

Madeline was once asked, what her mamma did with them now they were growing up. The reply was rather abrupt, but perfectly true: 'She lets us alone.' In this 'letting alone' lay the great secret of Mrs Clifford's influence. The watchfulness exercised was never seen; she guarded them, indeed, from evil books, evil companions, evil sights and associations; but it was not by prohibition, but by an unnoticed care, which kept such things out of their way. Within certain limits Madeline and Ruth were perfectly free. They might walk where they liked, and when they liked; they might choose their own reading;

Digitized by Google

write to their own friends; have secrets between themselves, if they desired it; spend their allowance according to their own will; and, when surprise was sometimes expressed that Mrs Clifford could trust them with so much liberty, she replied, 'They were kept very strictly when they were quite children; they were never allowed then to disobey, and now they have lost the inclination.' And it was true; they had lost the inclination, for their mother's tastes and wishes were their own. What inducement, for instance, could there be to peruse books privately, when their chief delight was to go to their mother with their favourite passages, and find in her interest an increase of their own enjoyment. Ruth sometimes came into the room absorbed in some poem or tale, and anxious that Madeline should read it also; but, if Mrs Clifford was present, and Madeline away, her natural exclamation was, 'Oh! there is mamma, that will do just as well;' and Mrs Clifford would stop and listen, and make her remarks, as if she could entirely enter into her child's enthusiasm; and if the thought crossed her mind, that Ruth might be better employed in some other way, the advice was stopped for that moment. Confidence and affection would do more, she knew, in forming a character to good than reading history; and in the course of a few days she would perhaps talk to Ruth upon some more serious subject, which she was studying herself, and so to lead her to begin it; in order, as Ruth expressed it, to be 'reading the same book as mamma.'

A similar principle was carried out in other ways. Mrs Clifford was anxious to be the friend of her children. As a first step towards attaining this object, she allowed them to be friends to each other. With a difference of age, there must of necessity be a certain difference of feeling. Many little things they might be able to say between themselves, which they would consider almost too trifling for her. This feeling would lessen as they grew older, but at present it was unavoidable, and Mrs Clifford gave it full scope. Madeline often said without hesitation: 'Mamma, Ruth and I have a little secret together;' and the remark was to Mrs Clifford a greater assurance of unreserve and simplicity of mind than any confidence given directly to herself. The age which Ruth and Madeline had attained was just that when restraint was most likely to spring up between themselves and those who had authority over them. Their judgments and general character were not sufficiently

Digitized by Google

fixed to enable them to be their mother's companion in her daily anxieties; whilst the spirit of independence was naturally gaining strength, and their opinions upon all subjects were rapidly forming.

Mrs Clifford was, however, prepared for this stage in her children's life. She was thoroughly endued with the charity which 'beareth and endureth all things,' and the faith which can trust the best and most cherished wishes of our hearts in the hands of God. The difference between Ruth and Madeline was as clear to her as to her husband, perhaps even more so; for it was shown in the little instances which came more immediately under her notice; and now it was no secret to her that something was wrong in Ruth's mind, yet she waited patiently till the time when Ruth's confidence should be willingly given; and the only change in her manner was an increased tenderness—a winning consideration and care, which Ruth felt, though she could not account for it. She began to long for the answer from Florence more and more, that she might consider herself released from her promise, and speak to her mamma without reserve.

This wish was strongly on her mind when, on the morning before mentioned, a servant on horseback rode up to the Parsonage gate.

'From Sheldon, I am sure,' exclaimed Madeline, going to the window. 'I know that bright scarlet livery so well. Don't you remember, mamma, we used to wonder whose it could be before we knew Mrs De Lacy?'

'I suppose the picnic is to be fixed,' said Ruth. 'The weather is just settled enough, if it will only continue.'

Madeline became suddenly grave. 'I don't think I want it to be fixed,' she said.

Ruth's head was bent over her writing desk, but she looked up at this speech. 'Maddy, what do you mean?—why not?'

'I don't know—that is, I can't say; but I do not want it.'

Ruth went on writing, but her pen moved unsteadily. The door opened, and a note was brought in. Ruth did not raise her eyes.

'It is from Mrs De Lacy,' said Mrs Clifford, 'and about the picnic. It is fixed for Tuesday week; and, my dear Ruth, here are a few lines at the end for you from Miss Trevelyan.'

Ruth put out her hand eagerly; but she had no fear that her mamma had read what Florence might have written.

Digitized by Google

'May I see?' said Madeline, coming to look over her.

Ruth drew back pettishly. 'Let me read it myself, Maddy.' She glanced her eye in an instant over the few lines, written on coloured paper, prettily embossed. 'There is nothing in it,' she exclaimed, tossing the note across the table to her sister.

Madeline read it more attentively. 'It is a very pressing invitation,' she replied, when she had finished.

'Yes, very.' Ruth said no more, and a few minutes after left her writing and went to walk in the garden by herself.

And this was all the answer to her letter! An invitation which placed her in a greater difficulty than ever. '*You must come*,' Florence wrote, with two or three dashes. Very meaning dashes they were to Ruth's eye, implying much more than a mere wish to see her. Ruth was extremely annoyed; it was such a tantalising, irritating mode of proceeding. And there would scarcely be any use in writing again. Florence was always inclined to be obstinate, and if she had determined upon not giving an answer till they met, no entreaties would be of any avail. In this dilemma Ruth thought of speaking to her mamma. She certainly considered herself in a measure freed from the promise of secrecy. It had been given but for a short time, and she had warned Florence that it must now be at an end. Her mamma's advice would, she knew, be most valuable. Mrs Clifford would see at once whether it could be right any longer to keep Justine's secret—and if she could in honour go to her for help; it certainly appeared the right course. But Ruth began to reason—perhaps it would make Florence angry if she were to do so; perhaps it would break off their acquaintance; perhaps she should have no opportunity of talking seriously to her, and Florence might still go on encouraging Justine—that would be very bad for her—or she might still contrive in some way that Mrs De Lacy should engage Justine as a governess for Agnes—that would be very bad for Agnes. There were a great many dangerous possibilities—all to be avoided, if Ruth could only see Florence and convince her that she was wrong. At last Ruth magnanimously made up her mind to act the martyr, and say nothing to her mamma—to sacrifice herself, in fact, for her friend, and swerve a little from her own duty in the hope of bringing Florence to a sense of hers.

When Ruth went back to the school-room she found Madeline looking very thoughtful, with a book before her, but evidently not reading. Once or twice she seemed inclined to speak, but

Digitized by Google

to be afraid. After a time, however, she said, with an effort, 'Ruth, about the picnic—do you mean—that is, do you think it would signify if I were not to go?'

'Signify, Maddy! What are you talking of?'

'Would there be any harm?' continued Madeline.

'My dear Maddy, you must be dreaming. No, of course, there would not be any harm; but why possibly should you not go?'

'I think I would rather not,' replied Madeline, whilst the colour mounted to her cheeks; 'because it might be harm to me. You know, Ruth, I am not good, and I think about things so. When I am going anywhere it is always in my mind; and just now I would rather not.'

Ruth understood in an instant that Madeline alluded to the confirmation. 'You had better talk to mamma,' she said.

'Yes, if I can; I shall by and by.'

'It will be very awkward,' was Ruth's next observation, to which Madeline said nothing, and both were silent.

Ruth was almost angry with Madeline for this reserve, though she did not at all desire to talk herself upon the subject which she knew was occupying her sister's thoughts. Several times lately when the picnic had been referred to, Madeline had hinted a disinclination to go: but Ruth fancied it was only because she did not like the prospect of encountering a large party. Now she saw that it was a much deeper feeling. Ruth did not sympathise with her sister. Since the picnic had been first proposed her mind had been so occupied that she had scarcely remembered it was to take place; and now there seemed a necessity for going. If she did not, there might be no opportunity of seeing Florence Trevelyan. And then Ruth thought to herself, 'Mamma and papa do not object, and why should I?' When Ruth wished to decide for herself upon any occasion, she was in the habit of saying, that now she was growing up it must be better to exercise a little judgment of her own. In this instance the case happened to be reversed, and it suited her to give up her own judgment. But Ruth did not know that her papa and mamma saw no objection. In fact, she had reason to imagine they might do so; for once or twice lately Mrs Clifford had regretted that if the picnic were delayed, it would bring it near the time of the confirmation; and this morning she had not shown any pleasure in the thought of their amusement, and indeed had not made any remark about it. These might have been suspicious circumstances, if Ruth had fairly considered them.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XLI.

THE evening came; Ruth grew more vexed and unhappy about everything. Madeline's reserve—the stupidity of Florence—the picnic, which she did not care for, and yet to which she must go. Ruth was not generally cross; but this evening nothing pleased her. It began to rain, and instead of taking a walk, as they often did at that time when the day had been very warm, she was obliged to find employment within doors. Madeline read, and Ruth knew by the binding that the book was a volume of sermons. This made her more cross. Madeline might just as well, she thought, read sermons in her own room; but the next minute Madeline called to her to point out something which she particularly liked, and her sunny smile and simple, cheerful voice, soothed Ruth's ruffled temper. She felt that Maddy might do anything she liked—read, or talk, or be silent—it did not signify. No one could be annoyed with her. Madeline did not read her sermon with a fixed attention. She looked often out of the window, as if watching for some one. Presently the little green gate opening from the garden into the lane was swung to, and Mr Clifford came up the gravel walk to the house. Madeline turned again to her book; but when her papa came in she closed it, and began talking upon indifferent subjects. Ruth was silent, which was rather unusual for her when parish matters were discussed, as she generally took a most active part in them. Madeline's nervous manner was apparent to her; it showed that her heart was not interested in what was said, and when, as Mr Clifford was going out of the room, Madeline asked whether she might say a few words to him alone, Ruth knew well what the subject of the conversation would be. A seed of uneasiness was implanted in Ruth's breast. She said to herself that Madeline was over-scrupulous, but in her heart she felt that she might be right.

The study door closed, and Mr Clifford inquired what Madeline had to say. Almost every one's heart beats quicker at such a question. Madeline's beat very fast; but nothing was to be gained by delay, so she began at once—'Papa, I wanted to speak to you—about—I don't know whether it is right; but, if you please, could you tell me about Mrs De Lacy's invitation?'

Digitized by Google

Mr Clifford looked half surprised, half amused. He had not even heard of it that day.

'The picnic, papa,' continued Madeline.

'Well, my love, the picnic—what is your difficulty? Does your mamma wish you not to go to it?'

'I don't know; she has not said so. But, papa, would it be wrong to stay away?'

'Certainly not, if you wish to do so—at least I should imagine not. But why should you?' Mr Clifford looked at Madeline, and by the expression of her face guessed what she would answer. 'Would you really rather not go?' he continued.

'I think it would be better—safer for me,' and Madeline's face brightened at the hope of being understood. 'You know, papa, I think of things so—they run in my head; and I should enjoy this so much—that is, if we go to St Cuthbert's Castle, and Ruth says that was the place mentioned.'

Mr Clifford considered before he replied; then he said, 'Was this your own idea, my love?'

'Yes, quite my own.'

'And has it only entered your head to-day.'

'I have thought about it a little before, but not so much, because it did not seem as if the time ever would be fixed.'

'And what does Ruth think?' inquired Mr Clifford.

'That is one thing which worries me,' exclaimed Madeline. 'I am afraid Ruth will not go without me, and I could not bear her to be disappointed. What shall I do?—what can I do to be right?' she added, in a very anxious tone.

'We will think, my dear child,' answered her father, and as he said this he kissed her with a tenderness of manner which fully repaid Madeline for the effort she had made in speaking to him. 'First of all, we must remember that we may make mistakes in matters of conscience by being too scrupulous; by looking upon God, I mean, as a hard taskmaster. I do not say that you do so now—indeed, it is most likely I shall quite enter into your notions—but religion is meant to hallow our innocent amusements, not to shut us out from them; therefore, it is not because you expect a good deal of pleasure from going to St Cuthbert's that you should be alarmed, and imagine it may do you harm.'

'I should like it very much, indeed,' said Madeline, laying a stress upon the last word.

'Yes, and you were intended to like it very much indeed.

Digitized by Google

Going with pleasant companions to a place you have heard a good deal about must be very agreeable. But God will not be angry with you for finding it so.'

'Not if I think about it very much?' said Madeline.

'No, not in general. It is right, we know, to govern our thoughts, and not to let them dwell upon any subject at wrong times, or so as to make us forget our duties; but this is a very hard lesson—perhaps it may take us many years to learn it—and we may be sure that God will be mercifully patient with us whilst we are learning it—supposing, I mean, that we are trying to do so. He will not expect us to be perfect at once.'

'But just now?' said Madeline.

'Ah! that is the question,' answered Mr Clifford. 'Things which are most innocent in themselves may be wrong because of peculiar circumstances.'

'And this would be wrong in me, then?' inquired Madeline.

'It will be wrong if it is likely to engross too much of your thoughts.'

'But what is too much?' asked Madeline, eagerly.

'What are your special duties at this season?' answered her father. 'All which interferes with them will be too much.'

'I ought to spend some time every day in reading and thinking about being confirmed, I know,' said Madeline.

'But going to the picnic will not interfere with that, except upon the one day; and even then you might give up some time earlier in the morning.'

Madeline looked at him with an expression of sadness. 'Ah! papa,' she said, 'you think I am as good as Ruth. But if I do give up the time, I shall never fix my thoughts.'

Mr Clifford smiled. 'We have reached the right point, my dear Madeline. I can quite understand your feelings. Most likely the picnic would occupy a good deal of your thoughts; and, just now, when it is so very essential that you should be serious and collected, such a temptation may well be avoided; at another time it might be better to battle with it. Only, I would ask you one question. What is it that makes the picnic too interesting—more interesting than religion?'

Madeline's eyes filled with tears as she replied, 'Because I am so bad.'

Mr Clifford took her hand in his; 'I did not mean to distress you, my dear child. I was sure you felt this; but will

Digitized by Google

you try not to forget it? I mean, to remember it always on similar occasions.'

'I don't think it will be easy to forget it,' said Madeline.

'Yes, indeed, it will be a great deal easier than you imagine. Many right-minded people are extremely apt to do so.'

'To forget that they do wrong things?' said Madeline, with some surprise.

'To forget that it is not because they are good, but because they are wicked, that innocent amusements do them harm,' replied Mr Clifford.

'Yet they are right in not joining in them,' said Madeline.

'Quite right; but quite wrong if they condemn others. If you were very good, you might go to the picnic and not be at all disturbed by it. Others of your own age may go who will be preparing for confirmation like you. Their minds may be much steadier than yours. I wonder what you will think about them?'

Madeline did not know what to answer.

'Will you, my love,' continued Mr Clifford, 'make it an especial subject of prayer that you may be able to remember why you do not go? And when the day comes, will you spend your time for meditation in thinking particularly about your faults; seeing how great they are, and how many things are dangerous to you because of them? Such thoughts are our only safeguard when we refuse to join in the amusements of our friends. They are the only thoughts which can keep us from being proud and uncharitable.'

'I hope I should not think others wrong in going,' said Madeline; 'because Ruth will go, most probably, and she is so very good.'

'Does Ruth wish to go?' asked Mr Clifford, quickly.

'I think she does; but she does not talk about it.' Mr Clifford looked graver than before. 'It is a most important time for you both,' he said. 'I should be glad to feel that you were giving up as much thought to it as possible.'

'I try every day,' said Madeline; 'but, papa, my thoughts go all away, and then I am very unhappy;' and here her voice changed, as she added, 'it is very wicked, I know, but I long sometimes to wait another year.'

'Another year would not help you, my child. You would come with the same request at the end of it.'

'And should I never be more fit?' said Madeline.

Digitized by Google

'Why seek for what God does not require?' said Mr Clifford. 'When our Saviour restored the lame and the blind, did He wish them to walk and see a little before He made them quite whole?'

'He told them they must have faith,' said Madeline.

'Yes; that is, He required a trust in His power, and a willingness to be cured. This is all He asks now of you.'

'I should like to be good more than anything,' observed Madeline.

'And not only that, but I think you are willing to do all that may be necessary, whether agreeable or not, in order to become good,' continued her father. 'We must not separate these two things. A person suffering from some bodily disease, for instance, will say he would like to be cured; but he may not like to try the remedy. He may be suffering from the toothache, and yet not agree to have the tooth extracted.'

'That is what I mean,' said Madeline, quickly. 'I should like to feel that I had got rid of some of the bad things, and then I should be more sure that I was willing—that I was fit for the blessings. Because you know, papa,' she added, in a faltering voice, 'I am not at all fit for the Holy Communion, and I must go to it if I am confirmed.'

'But, my dear Madeline,' said Mr Clifford, 'the getting rid of these "bad things," as you term it, is to be the business of your life. Confirmation and the Holy Communion are to be your great assistants in this business. If you throw away the help, what are you to do?'

'I might pray and read the Bible,' said Madeline.

'God tells you to do something more,' replied Mr Clifford. 'He will not accept us if we perform only half our duties.'

'And I must go,' said Madeline, whilst the tears which had for some time been gathering flowed slowly down her cheeks.

Mr Clifford suffered her to cry silently for some moments; at length he said, 'You are frightened, dearest.'

'Yes, so very frightened sometimes,' said Madeline, in a broken voice; 'and, papa, I think I should be glad not to go; that shows how bad I am.'

'Then if I were to tell you that you should never go,' said Mr Clifford, 'you would be contented?'

Madeline started. 'O papa! no. I could not bear it.'

'And God does not wish you to bear it,' replied her father. 'He is willing—more willing than you can imagine—to receive

Digitized by Google

you; to love you and bless you, and make you happy. He asks for no fitness except that which you have yourself just this moment acknowledged. You may go to your confirmation, you may even kneel to receive the Holy Communion, conscious of all your faults, all your imperfections, yet with the same confidence in His love as you feel now in mine. And, Madeline, my child, by and by, years hence—if it should please God to spare your life—you will see all this fully, you will be thankful and happy then, that you were not suffered to give way to doubts and scruples now. Religion will be all in all to you.'

'As it is to you,' said Madeline.

A momentary shade passed over Mr Clifford's countenance; yet it was but momentary: a quiet, bright smile followed it, and he looked in his child's face and said, 'Yes, Madeline, as it is, I trust now, all in all—the one great joy—the one unchanging reality.'

Madeline was silent. The feelings gathering in her breast could find no words for utterance. She only said as she left the room, 'Then, papa, you will settle for me that I am not to go to the picnic.'

CHAPTER XLII.

WE will take a glance at Mrs De Lacy's drawing-room on the afternoon of the following day. It was a long, rather narrow room, terminating in a bow, with French windows opening upon a lawn. The furniture was too showy to be elegant. The paper attracted attention from its bright pink pattern and gilding; the eye was disturbed and confused by the number of odd-shaped chairs, sofas, inlaid tables, and light ornaments, which crowded a comparatively small space; every book seemed to have dressed itself in its gayest binding; and every article approaching to the useful was carefully disguised, by being turned into some shape totally unlike itself.

By the round table, drawn into the recess of the bow, Justine le Vergnier reclined, in a low easy chair, whilst Florence stood by her, picking to pieces a leaf of verbena. Justine wore a walking-dress, but her very small transparent bonnet was untied, and thrown back off her head; and either this circum-

Digitized by Google

stance, or it might have been really an alteration in the expression of her face, gave her a less gentle, quiet look than formerly. Her eyes moved more quickly, though they were always remarked as never being still; her lips curled satirically; her attitude was more studied and less graceful. She had an air of self-possession and determination, not pleasing in so young a person; altogether there was the indescribable change, not to be seen in any one particular, but to be felt perpetually, which indicates a character that is lowering, not rising, in tone. Florence, in the presence of Justine, appeared a simple, retiring girl.

'And my aunt has really brought matters to an end, then,' said the former, throwing away the last atom of the faded leaf, and turning to Justine with a doubtful smile.

'Ah, oui—that is, it must be an end soon. Madame is most entirely obliging, delighted: we shall be the best friends.'

'It would be all very well if it were not for that letter of Ruth's,' said Florence. 'If she has a conscience crotchet, she may do us harm at any moment.'

'Mais, tu es triste, mon amie,' said Justine, laughing. 'I care nothing for Ruth; and you have written.'

'Yes, but perhaps she may not come to the picnic; or, she may choose to go and talk about you beforehand; she threatens to do so. I wonder, Justine, you can take it all so quietly.'

'Now, listen,' said Justine, holding up her finger, and looking archly at Florence; 'you know we are famous—we French, I mean—for sunshine—"gaieté de cœur." I am French; I have had heaps of troubles before—I shall have heaps again. But why vex me? If I don't stay here I shall go somewhere else—I shall do something.'

Florence looked at her with a mixture of wonder and irritation.

'What am I to do?' she exclaimed. 'My aunt will say I have deceived her.'

Justine shrugged her shoulders.

'Bien! and if you have, it was for a friend. But where was the deceit? Madame asked what I was like—you told her; you gave my account. Who knows me as well as I know myself? What for should she ask questions of that woman—that Mrs Carter?'

'Mrs Carter is certainly extremely prejudiced,' said Florence.

'That is little!—c'est affreux—she tells. I would not say

Digitized by Google

what she tells, and all because she would get another into my place.'

'And yet you can be indifferent whether Ruth talks about you or not?' said Florence.

'Point du tout!—not at all indifferent; but you see there are always ways. We will come over Ruth.'

'Not so easily as you may think,' replied Florence.

'Pardon! I knew Ruth when you did.'

'At school; but you saw little enough of her.'

'Enough for what I wish. Ruth loves dearly to rule; she loves to put that little finger of hers into other person's concerns; she shall put it into mine.'

'Yours!' exclaimed Florence, in a tone of alarm.

Justine laughed heartily.

'Ah! to be sure: you take fright; but trust me. See what a pretty note I have written;' and she drew a folded paper from her reticule, and gave it to Florence. 'You see, my happiness rests on her coming to the picnic,' said Justine, still laughing, as she quoted her own words; 'I have so much confidence to give her; I want her advice. She can't help herself now—she must come.'

'And she must keep quiet till she has seen you,' said Florence.

'Of course; Ruth is most proper—she is full of honour; she will never speak till we have met.'

'And if you do meet, what then?' inquired Florence.

'We will see—we will think,' said Justine, lightly tapping her forehead. 'I never was in a trouble yet, but I found my way out of it! and we will go, mignonne, you and I; we will have our treat; we will be at Paris together.'

'And you will show me all the best shops, and tell my aunt about everything that is fit to be seen, and do just whatever I like,' said Florence.

'Oui, assurement! let me only be there. Once in Paris—in my country—la belle France, we will have our pleasure then; and it is so bright, so gay. Ah, Florence! you don't live in England; it is all, as you said one day—eat, drink, sleep, and begin again.'

'The difficulty is to manage it,' said Florence, musingly. 'You will really take a great deal of care of Agnes, won't you, Justine?' she added.

'Surely; the greatest of all. Did I not take care of the little

Digitized by Google

Darnleys? That very evening when I went out to see my friends—the evening I was so caught; I had put them all quietly to bed: they were asleep—very comfortable—no harm could happen to them.'

'You have a charming accent,' said Florence; 'that is one great advantage. My aunt heard it remarked the other day, and she admires your voice extremely. If you only make Agnes sing as well, she will be quite satisfied.'

'Ah! we will do everything—everything à merveille!' answered Justine, laughing; 'only just at the present moment we must think about this little affair. You are writing to Alice; put my note in the envelope, and Alice will give it.'

'A good notion,' observed Florence; 'we shall save a day by it; for my aunt is going to drive over to the Manor this afternoon, and she can take it.'

'I wish I could be quite sure that there is no fear of Lady Catharine,' said Justine, less lightly than was usual.

'Oh! you need not be under any alarm about her,' replied Florence; 'it was one of my first inquiries of Alice. I should never have proposed your staying here so long, if I had not been quite sure upon that point. Lady Catharine scarcely remembers your name, Alice says. You know Mrs Carter never tells more than she can help of her school matters; and if she did, my aunt always calls you Veray, happily. I was never so grateful before for her habit of misnaming French people.'

'Then you don't wish to go with your aunt to-day?' inquired Justine.

'Oh, no; it was half proposed that I should, but I have no fancy for encountering Juno, even for the sake of Alice. The very sight of the Manor gives me a fit of low spirits; and how Alice can exist there I can't imagine. I should make up romances, and fill it with ghosts for my own amusement.'

'Ghosts!' repeated Justine, and a strange look of thought crossed her face. 'Les revenans! I don't like them.'

Florence began to laugh, but Justine was grave.

'I could not live in a place where there were any,' she said; and then she added quickly, 'What shall we do this afternoon?'

'Now, really, Justine, you are silly,' persisted Florence. 'Ghosts are nothings.'

'I am not so certain; I don't fancy them,' again observed Justine.

Digitized by Google

'And you look quite in earnest,' said Florence, fixing her eyes upon her.

'Ah, oui, in earnest; one must be in earnest sometimes.'

Justine sighed; and Florence said, in a tone of vexation—

'Why, Justine, you are dull; what has come over you all of a sudden?'

'Ce n'est rien, c'est une folie; what shall we do this afternoon?'

'Drive in the pony-chaise; but, Justine, I should like to know,' said Florence, according to her old custom, still keeping up a disagreeable subject, 'I should be glad if you would tell me what made you grow so dull in a minute?'

'We are all dull at times,' replied Justine; 'that is, in England. No one is dull in France.'

'You must not be dull with my aunt,' observed Florence; 'she cannot endure dulness. It must be nothing but talking and laughing for ever to suit her; that is what she likes in you.'

'Well! she may depend; I will do my best,' replied Justine. 'But you see, Florence, chere amie, one sits alone now and then, and then the thoughts come. It was all Mrs Carter; she put them into my head first.'

'But what thoughts?' inquired Florence, in a curious tone.

'All sorts; very dull ones. It was such a dull house; it gives me "les vapeurs" to think of it.'

'What do you mean?' asked Florence.

'Why, you ought to know,' replied Justine, impatiently; 'you have said the same yourself.'

'I don't remember; I can't understand,' continued Florence, 'I wish you would be plain.'

Justine shrugged her shoulders, and exclaimed against the stupidity of Florence, and then added—

'It was not always so; when I was in London first, I was very bright—always laughing; the world seemed quite merry; and when I went amongst you all, that was bright too. I liked it; I liked Mrs Carter; she was very kind, and I could bear the sermons, though she gave me a good many. Now and then I listened to them and tried to please her. It was just a fit, but it went off. Clara Manners laughed at her, and I laughed. One can't think gravely about things that people say when one laughs at them; and so, by and by, I came to care less for her long speeches; and then they were tiresome to me,

Digitized by Google

and then I could not bear them, and I took to reading those books just to forget them.'

'And the fuss that was made!' said Florence, lifting up her hands.

'Yes, the fuss! shall you ever forget it? But I was better off than you; I could get away and read just as many as I chose; and they were charming; they put all the long sermons out of my head. She used to call sometimes and go over all the old grievances, and I behaved very well; I listened like a lamb; but I never cared for anything, because I could forget.'

'There will be one comfort here,' said Florence; 'my aunt will never preach dull sermons to you.'

'But it is the forget which is the trouble,' said Justine; 'all that talking and preaching, and telling one to say prayers, and think that some day or other I am to grow old and die, comes back; it makes me ill. When you said about the ghosts, it came; it is quite sudden; it does not stay, but it is horrible; it makes me feel—ah!' and Justine drew a long breath.

Florence looked rather blank at this announcement.

'You don't mean to have these fits often, do you?' she said.

'Mean! but who would have them that could help? No, I dance, sing, play, anything but think.'

'And you may read too,' observed Florence. 'My aunt likes novels, and she will lend you as many as you wish.'

'But it is not the same as it was; I read, but I am tired. I don't care for the books now,' said Justine, yawning; 'they are all alike. Ah! Florence, to be rich! that is the thing.'

'Yes, that is the thing,' said Florence; 'one could have so many pleasures if one were only rich.'

'But you are rich; you can go where you like; think of me, without a penny in the world, if I don't work, work, and talk, and teach; and forced besides to go here, and stay there, and never have a will of my own. Oh! it is sad—this life.'

'Pauvre petite! I am very sorry for you,' said Florence, kindly; 'but if we can have our way about Paris, it will all be well; and we will forget the ghosts and the sermons.'

Justine rose suddenly from her seat, and opening the piano, began to sing a lively French air. Florence lingered near her, praising and caressing her. Justine's face resumed its usual expression, and before a quarter of an hour had elapsed, her manner was as light and her voice as gay as if she had never been troubled by a serious thought.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XLIII.

THAT same day at the Manor was spent by Alice unlike that of Florence, but it was not without importance to her. It did not, indeed, differ materially from many others which she had lately passed, but there is no such thing as standing still in life. As we move onwards in time, so we also move onwards in the formation of our characters. The direction which Alice was taking was unfortunately a wrong one, though it might not have seemed so at the first glance. Alice was passing a busy morning; her table was spread with scraps of paper, account-books, lists of names, and calculations; upon her desk a large ruled book lay open, filled with strokes and dots, and various unintelligible marks; and some untidy black pens, torn sheets of blotting paper, and a ragged pen-wiper, were near it. Alice had a pencil and a ruler in her hand, and was just proceeding to work, to make up some of the club accounts, when Lady Catharine looked into the room.

'What are you doing, my dear?' she said; 'I thought this was your reading morning.'

'I am going to finish the accounts,' was Alice's reply.

'The accounts? I understood they were to have been done yesterday.'

'I had not time,' replied Alice, beginning to rule diligently.

Lady Catharine advanced into the room. 'My dear, I don't like that excuse. I hear it a great deal too often. If you managed your time properly there would be no occasion for it.'

'I was out yesterday afternoon,' said Alice.

'I beg your pardon, my dear, you were not out very long. You had sufficient leisure when you returned: what did you do with yourself?'

'I read history,' said Alice, rather sulkily.

'But I wish you to read in the morning. Had you no time then either?'

'Not enough,' said Alice.

Lady Catharine bit her lip. 'It is so strange, my dear, that when I have marked out your day, given you precise hours for everything, when you really have nothing whatever to interfere with you, that you should still be so exceedingly irregular. What was the reason that you did not read in the morning?'

Alice blushed, and said she had taken up the 'Bride of

Digitized by Google

Lammermoor,' and had become so interested in it that she did not know how the time went by, till it was nearly the luncheon hour.

Lady Catharine was too much annoyed to be softened by Alice's sincerity. She walked up to the book-case, and stood before it thinking. 'I had hoped these books would have had a different effect,' she said. 'They were meant for proper recreation at proper hours.'

Alice went on with her occupation, but the very manner in which she handled her pencil showed that a storm was brewing.

'If you were a baby, Alice,' continued Lady Catharine, 'I should be inclined to take these books to my own room, and only lend them to you at particular times. They are a sad temptation where there is no strength of mind to resist.'

Alice looked up, and said with an indifferent air, 'Certainly it might be better if they were not here.'

Lady Catharine made no reply. She came near to Alice, and saw what she was doing, and then she said coldly, 'Your method is a bad one; you will never be correct if you do not arrange the names alphabetically.'

Alice continued ruling.

'You can never refer easily, if you do not,' continued Lady Catharine. 'Has Mr Clifford seen the book?'

Alice replied that she had shown it to him once, but he had not found fault with it.

'That was because he was too good-natured,' said Lady Catharine; 'and in fact, gentlemen do not understand these things well. It would be quite worth your while to begin it again.'

Alice's pencil dropped from her fingers, and she laid her hands on her lap.

'Of course, my dear, you think me very particular,' said Lady Catharine, trying to assume a gentler voice: 'but when you are arrived at my age, you will see that these little things constitute the real comfort and well-being of our lives. Without order, neatness, and regularity, the highest virtues may become comparatively useless.'

Alice turned to a blank page, and rising, offered Lady Catharine her seat; and asked if she would have the kindness to show her in what way she thought the accounts might be better kept.

Lady Catharine hesitated, then she sat down, and began to examine the book. She read over some of the names, and com-

Digitized by Google

mented upon them. '"Gibbs;" they pay constantly, I see. "Moore;" I wonder they have kept on so long, with the husband so ill. "Barker;" they were always irregular, when I had the management; but they must be inquired after. "Goring;" I see they only paid the first three weeks. Take the names down on paper, Alice, and we will go and inquire about them this afternoon.'

Alice said that Mr Clifford had spoken to her upon the subject, and she had intended to go herself and tell the people they must be regular.

'Hem! I don't know. Did Mr Clifford beg you to go?'

'Ruth and Madeline used to do it, and I thought I might,' said Alice.

'We can go together,' said Lady Catharine. 'I shall like to have the opportunity of talking to the people myself; and I am not fond of your visiting the cottages alone.'

Lady Catharine did not see the expression of Alice's face, or she would probably have continued her task of arranging the accounts with less satisfaction. She went on in happy ignorance, really doing Alice very material service, and, by her neatness and precision, clearing all difficulties; and Alice stood by with folded hands, silent and abstracted. When Lady Catharine had finished half a page, she said cheerfully, as she held the pencil over her shoulder to Alice, 'There, my dear, I think I have done some good; now you will go on easily.'

An icicle could not have been more chilling than Alice's 'Thank you.'

Lady Catharine turned round suddenly, looked her full in the face, and laying her hand upon her, said, very gravely, 'Alice, are we always to live together in this way?'

Alice withdrew her hand, but did not speak.

'Have you nothing to say?' continued Lady Catharine.

'I am sorry to have vexed you,' replied Alice.

Lady Catharine rose up in her most stately manner. 'Alice,' she said, 'you know that is not what I require. I do not wish you to say you are sorry, when you do not feel it.'

'I am sorry I did not finish the accounts yesterday,' said Alice; and there was evidently truth in the acknowledgment.

'It is not one case which is of consequence,' observed Lady Catharine; 'it is the perpetual repetition, the constant neglect of small duties, which I complain of. You are always late; always behindhand; always untidy; always forgetting.'

Digitized by Google

Alice's features grew more rigid as Lady Catharine became more excited.

'When I was your age,' continued Lady Catharine, 'I was always dressed by seven; I read the Psalms and Lessons, and some devotional book for half an hour; then I entered upon the business of the day. My life was ordered with the most perfect regularity. I never undertook a task till I had appointed the hour at which it was to be performed. I had the care of my own wardrobe; there was never a button or a hook missing. I read history every day, and I now have books and books which I filled with notes. When I was taken into society I always arranged my time so that my pursuits should not be materially interfered with. I am not telling you these things, Alice, with any notion of having been better than other people, but merely to show you what I did myself; and, therefore, what I have a fair right to expect from you.'

Alice stood like a statue.

'These are no light matters,' continued Lady Catharine; 'they tell upon your inward habit of mind. If you cannot make an exertion in small things, you cannot make it in great; and how then will you be fitted for confirmation? It is a very serious question indeed.'

Alice changed colour; it seemed as if she were about to take some desperate resolution; but the conversation was interrupted.

A servant announced that Mrs De Lacy was in the drawing-room.

'I will come,' said Lady Catharine; and, when the door closed, she repeated again, 'it is a very serious question, Alice;—I leave you to think of it.'

Lady Catharine walked slowly out of the room, and then Alice sat down, and resting her head upon the table, cried bitterly.

CHAPTER XLIV.

JUNO herself could not have received a visitor to Olympus with a more majestic air than that with which Lady Catharine Hyde greeted Mrs De Lacy. She was in no humour to be agreeable, and unfortunately Mrs De Lacy was not a person to

Digitized by Google

produce a favourable impression; for she was deficient in ability and tact, and Lady Catharine grew more ceremonious as she found it difficult to think of anything to say. Mrs De Lacy asked for Alice, but Lady Catharine would not propose to send for her; and, after having endured her penance as long as civility required, Mrs De Lacy rose to take leave, laying on the table at the same time a note for Alice, and expressing a formal hope that nothing would prevent their meeting next week at St Cuthbert's. The arrangements for the picnic were not quite made; when they were she would do herself the honour of communicating with Lady Catharine respecting them. Lady Catharine bowed. She would willingly have declared that she would have nothing to do with the picnic, and that Alice would be much better at home; but the habit of self-command was more powerful than the feeling of annoyance, and Mrs De Lacy departed, congratulating herself that the visit was over, and designating Lady Catharine as the most tiresome, stiff, haughty piece of propriety she had ever encountered.

Lady Catharine sat in silent meditation when her visitor was gone. But it was neither Mrs De Lacy's wearisome insipidity, nor Alice's conduct which occupied her thoughts. She reflected upon her own cold manner—her spirit of impatience at imperfection—the want of sympathy she was conscious of having shown; and, having blamed herself in one instance, she began to consider how far she had been right in others. Her treatment of Alice was always a fertile topic of inquiry, and she was still considering it, when another visitor was announced—rather an unusual one at that time of the day—Mr Clifford. Lady Catharine's natural distance of manner was never entirely overcome even by her thorough respect for Mr Clifford's character, and reverence for his office. But Mr Clifford was one of the few persons to whom it was a matter of indifference. His greeting was as hearty as if he had been sure of having it fully returned, instead of receiving a passive touch from a stiff hand, which seemed moved by wires, and fell helplessly as soon as the first impetus had ceased. His tone also was generally cheerful and free, and Lady Catharine, like many other cold-mannered persons, peculiarly enjoyed the society of those who would draw her out of herself. This day, however, Mr Clifford appeared under restraint, and talked about the weather and the crops, subjects which are always suspicious between persons who ought to be at home with each other. Presently he inquired how

Digitized by Google

Alice was. Lady Catharine smoothed her mittens and knitted her brow, and said she was quite well. This was sufficient to show Mr Clifford that 'well' did not mean well in mind. Without attempting to introduce by degrees the subject upon which he wished to speak, he said—

'I have been desirous, for some days, Lady Catharine, to talk to you about Alice.'

Lady Catharine's face changed instantly. The cloud of reserve passed away, and she gave Mr Clifford her hand again, and said, 'Thank you : Alice is always in my thoughts.'

'You are anxious about her, I am afraid,' said Mr Clifford ; 'so am I : but I should be glad to learn from you that there is no cause for it.'

Lady Catharine sighed, and the deep, sorrowful lines in her forehead seemed to contract and grow more marked.

'I am afraid there is cause,' continued Mr Clifford. 'I am afraid Alice is not yet what we both desire to see her.' He paused for a moment, and added, 'I have a doubt whether, in her present state, she is fitted for confirmation.'

Lady Catharine gave a slight start ; then, as if ashamed of such an expression of quick feeling, stretched her neck and threw back her head, and again began to smooth and settle the black mittens, which already fitted her hands like wax. A look of proud displeasure rested upon her countenance ; but it did not remain there. There was a struggle of some moments between natural haughtiness and Christian lowliness, whilst she leaned her elbow upon an arm of the chair, trying to cover her face with her hand, and hide the large tears which rolled slowly down her cheeks.

Mr Clifford was pained to see her ; but he was compelled to pursue the subject. 'You are disappointed, my dear Lady Catharine,' he said ; 'and not you alone—all who love you, and know how your heart rests upon Alice, are feeling with you.'

'No,' exclaimed Lady Catharine, looking up ; 'to feel with me is impossible.'

She was silent again, and Mr Clifford doubted how far he might venture to say more. But Lady Catharine presently continued, in a gentler but very hurried tone.

'Mr Clifford, you have known the history of my past life—my early happiness—my great trial ; and you have seen its effect. I long lived to myself, solitary in feeling, devoted as I

Digitized by Google

hoped to the service of God. Earth had no charm for me; it was but a dreary passage to a happier world. But God gave me an interest for this present world; Alice was left to me, and I was not only contented, but thankful to live. I thought that I was once more to know happiness. Only in a few short months the happiness was gone. I saw that Alice must not be educated by me, and I sent her from me. I bore that separation; for it seemed only for a time, and I believed that when she returned we should only be the more happy together from having been for a while parted. When the time came for her to leave school, I looked forward with delight to having her as a companion. I gave up thought, and comfort, and leisure, to make arrangements for her. I would have done a thousand times more and considered it no hardship, and what is my return?' Lady Catharine's voice grew husky, and she paused.

'Rather what will be the return by and by?' said Mr Clifford, mildly. 'At Alice's age'——

Lady Catharine interrupted. 'Alice is older than your own children. What would be your feelings if you were told they were not fitted for confirmation?'

'Most painful, doubtless,' he replied. 'But indeed, Lady Catharine, you have mistaken me if you thought I meant to decide the question. I have called this morning only to ask your opinion upon it.'

'I can give none,' replied Lady Catharine. 'Alice is entirely reserved with me. I believe she reads the books which you recommend, and she acquiesces in any observation I may make; but that is all.'

'And her daily conduct'— began Mr Clifford.

'Her daily conduct is a mystery. I have no idea what principles govern her. Sometimes she seems bent upon attending to her duties, and occasionally, though very rarely, the motive seems to be that of pleasing me. Then again she is careless, self-willed and moody, and shows a coldness of feeling which is utterly repelling.'

'I can scarcely imagine Alice to be really cold,' observed Mr Clifford. 'I have always imagined that she possessed strong feelings, if they could be brought out. Do you not think that it sometimes answers to take feeling and principle for granted?'

'I do not quite understand you,' was Lady Catharine's stiff reply, as she had recourse to her knitting.

Digitized by Google

'I mean,' replied Mr Clifford, 'that some young persons—Alice may be amongst the number—are more worked upon by knowing that it is believed they have good feelings and intentions than by being suspected of having bad ones, or at least none at all.'

'I cannot believe in what I do not think exists,' said Lady Catharine.

'But,' continued Mr Clifford,—'you must forgive me if I am speaking ignorantly,—Alice does occasionally appear to have right principles.'

'Very seldom.'

'Still it is sometimes. Do you not find her then alive to encouragement?'

Lady Catharine was silent. Encouragement she was conscious was not very often given. Presently she threw aside her knitting, and looking steadily at Mr Clifford, said, 'You think I have pursued a wrong system with Alice?'

It was an observation difficult to answer. After a momentary hesitation, Mr Clifford said, 'I have no right to judge; I know so little of Alice's daily life.'

'Truth is better than civility,' observed Lady Catharine, very coldly; and she returned again to her work.

Mr Clifford did not allow even a shade of annoyance to be visible on his face, and answered, with perfect gentleness, 'I desire always to be true. I cannot really judge correctly about Alice; but I should imagine our views with regard to her might differ.'

'Very possibly,' replied Lady Catharine, shortly.

'Alice is no longer a child,' continued Mr Clifford.

'Not in age, but in character she is.'

'Still, do you not think it may be safer to treat her according to her age? We are sure of that, we are not sure of her disposition.'

'I don't know, these modern notions are beyond me. I was brought up to be perfectly obedient; I wish Alice to be the same.'

'Again I must refer to her age,' said Mr Clifford.

'As a sanction for disobedience?' exclaimed Lady Catharine. 'That is the last thing I should have expected from you.'

'No; not for the world to sanction disobedience,' he replied: 'but if there are few rules, there is less opening for disobedience.'

Digitized by Google

Lady Catharine knitted extremely fast, and began to count her stitches diligently.

'Of course,' pursued Mr Clifford, 'if Alice had not been brought up in habits of obedience, I should be alarmed at the idea of giving her freedom now. I really cannot say too strongly how entirely I uphold strict discipline for very young children. Obedience in them is no obedience at all to my mind, unless it is instantaneous. What persons generally call obedience, strikes me as mere rebellion. I would make a baby in arms obedient. But when this is done, I think we need not be afraid of liberty at such an age as Alice has reached.'

'This may be all very well for Ruth and Madeline,' said Lady Catharine; 'but Alice is different. You do not know her, Mr Clifford.'

'No indeed, I do not,' he answered; 'that is my great trouble.'

'She is uncertain, wilful, hasty, vain, careless—she is really very provoking,' said Lady Catharine.

'Yes, I can fully believe it; but she has, I suppose, qualities on the other side?'

'Oh yes; a great many. She is reverent-minded; and I don't think she is conceited; and she feels, I believe, quickly and warmly, though she does not show it much to me. Then, although she is not naturally sincere, I sometimes find her very candid; and she has a good deal of energy, though no perseverance.'

'They are good materials to work upon,' observed Mr Clifford.

'Yes; but what is to be done if they are counterbalanced by the bad?'

'There are two methods to be tried,' was the reply; 'neither of them indeed separately; but, as a principle, one will always predominate—either constantly to check the evil, or to make a point of encouraging the good.'

Lady Catharine answered rather abruptly, 'To consider these properly would lead us into a discussion upon the very first principles of education.'

'Yes; and I would not intrude upon your time; and I really have not enough of my own to spare. I merely threw out the remark as a suggestion.'

'You uphold encouraging the good?' said Lady Catharine.

'Yes; and I think I have good authority. But I must not

Digitized by Google

enter further into the subject now. I think, however, you would find that when the good points of a character are encouraged, the bad ones will often die away.'

Lady Catharine only replied, 'It may be so;' and then, returning to the former topic, inquired what were Mr Clifford's intentions as to the confirmation.

'I came,' he said, 'hoping to receive some information here; but as that cannot be, I think it will be advisable to make an effort myself to reach the state of Alice's mind. I must certainly be more satisfied about her before I pronounce her fit for confirmation.'

He spoke decidedly, and Lady Catharine again looked extremely distressed. She did not, however, endeavour to alter his impression, but wished him good morning at first as stiffly as usual. Mr Clifford's manner, however, softened her, and tears stood in her eyes as she shook his hand with heartiness, and said, 'If I have made a mistake I am already punished for it.'

When Mr Clifford was gone, Lady Catharine went to her room, and sent a message to Alice, that she might, if she liked it, spend the afternoon at the Parsonage.

CHAPTER XLV.

ALICE had seldom been more sensible of the comfort of having friends near her than when she sat down to dinner at the Parsonage; for the time being, free and unconstrained. Ruth, indeed, was not in one of her gayest moods, but this suited the melancholy temper of mind in which Alice left the Manor; and her spirits were more soothed by the quiet, sensible conversation which passed than they could have been by mirth, in which she would not have been inclined to join. They went to the shore in the evening; Ruth and Alice walked together. The tide was going out, and all was very still, though the waves splashed gently as they rolled over the hard ribbed sand which stretched away to a great distance, covered in parts by shallow pools, that sparkled like burnished gold in the light of the sinking summer sun. Alice had a natural taste for beauty in nature; she

Digitized by Google

could catch the different effects of light and shade with something of an artist's eye; and now she pointed out to Ruth the high jutting rocks, black with the accumulation of sea-weed, which, with the dark outline of the red cliffs, formed a mass of shadow boldly contrasting with the brilliant colouring of the sky. Ruth's eye followed the same direction, but it did not rest there; it travelled higher, where purple clouds, tipped with gold, were piled one upon another, in forms of mountains, and castles, and cliffs, melting, as they approached nearer to the sun, into shapes of dazzling brilliancy, or spreading themselves out in long clear lines, till the whole breadth of the horizon was a sheet of vivid colour.

Time had been when Ruth would have gazed upon that radiant spectacle, that type of the glory which shall be hereafter, and thought only of purity, and hope, and the loveliness of an untainted world. Then, in childhood, her heart would have bounded within her, for the hues of the evening sky would have seemed the actual reality of heaven. Now she was changed! Childhood had passed, and with it its radiant deceptions. Ruth thought that she saw more clearly; she had learned to account for what she looked upon; to know why the clouds took their colouring from the sun; to be aware that forms which appeared so majestic were masses of vapour. She no longer fancied it possible to wander amongst the golden rocks, or sail upon the smooth sheet of water which appeared floating around their base; and at this calm and most beautiful hour her thoughts were only of earth.

Poor Ruth! it was a sad exchange that she was making; it is a sad exchange which we all make when we begin to take so great an interest in this world as to cease to be reminded of another. Even Alice was more open to enjoyment from the scene than she was; for Alice was sorrowful, and a heavy heart makes us look with interest upon the boundless, glorious sky, because it seems that, if we once could reach it, we should have passed beyond the power of mortal care.

Alice waited with patience whilst Ruth wished to rest. After a long silence, Ruth spoke—

'I wonder whether this weather will continue next week—it will be beautiful for the picnic.'

'I had forgotten the picnic,' said Alice, heaving a deep sigh: 'shall you enjoy it?'

'Madeline is not going,' was Ruth's evasive observation;

Digitized by Google

and before Alice could interrupt her by expressing surprise, she added, 'You will go, of course.'

Alice said she did not know; and began searching for something in the pocket of her dress. 'Where can it be?' she said. 'I remember now; Marsham gave it me just as I was coming away: it was a note from Florence. Mrs De Lacy brought it. Do you know, I was in such a hurry, so worried, I forgot to look at it.' She produced the envelope, and broke the seal. Justine's note fell to the ground. Ruth saw that it was for her, and guessed from whom it came by the cramped handwriting. She did not choose to read it then, and Alice did not notice that she had it. 'Florence is careful now,' said Alice, after she had skimmed her own note. 'I must thank you, Ruth, for that; but I think I troubled myself without cause. Things cannot be worse than they are; Lady Catharine is determined never to be pleased with me; so whether she scolds me for one thing more or less does not much signify.'

Ruth's attention was attracted by Alice's desponding tone, and she exclaimed, 'Dear Alice, there must be something going on worse than usual.'

'I don't know that it is worse,' replied Alice, 'only perhaps I feel it more to-day, and there seems no end to it. And it was not so much my fault. I was doing what I was obliged to do: settling the accounts. Why should she fret me to-day for what was wrong yesterday?'

Ruth drew figures on the sand by way of occupation, for she really did not know what answer to make to this often-repeated style of complaint, and she did not quite understand how the constant repetition of any particular annoyance tends to increase it.

Alice perceived Ruth's want of sympathy; and, leaving her, walked away by herself, till a projecting rock hid her from sight. Then she sat down upon the sand, resting against the rock, and, closing her eyes, listened to the low rushing of the waves, whilst suffering thoughts and fancies to pass through her mind rapidly, and without connection, as in a dream. They were all sorrowful, all tending to increase the conviction that her lot in life was a sorrowful one, and destined to become still more so. Alice sat long in this mood; at last she heard her name repeated, and looking up, saw Mr Clifford making his way to her over the rocks. As he came near, he began to rally her upon her sudden passion for solitude. Alice had no heart to answer in

Digitized by Google

the same strain, and merely said, that she liked quietness sometimes.

'And this is a pleasant seat,' said Mr Clifford, throwing himself upon the sand by her side; 'I am glad you like quietness, Alice. As a boy,' he continued, 'I have spent many hours on such evenings as this, watching the sun sinking, and fancying myself travelling with it to other lands. Now one has little leisure for such dreamings.'

'I don't like sunset,' observed Alice; 'it is always melancholy.'

'But a little melancholy is not disagreeable,' said Mr Clifford: 'a very little—such as one feels when relaxing after a hard day's work.'

Alice showed no willingness to enter into the conversation. She stood up and remarked, that as the tide was coming in, they had better go back.

'Wait a few minutes,' said Mr Clifford; 'there is no hurry; and Ruth is gone to meet her mamma and Madeline.'

Alice felt herself caught in a snare; for she was certain that something serious was coming.

'Here is a comfortable seat for you,' said Mr Clifford, pointing to a large stone; and Alice, unable to find an excuse for escape, reseated herself. 'I am glad to have this opportunity of saying a few words to you, Alice,' he added; 'we are not often alone together.'

Alice said 'No;' she could think of nothing else.

'And we have a good deal to talk about, have we not?'

Alice said she did not know.

'Time runs on quickly. The confirmation day will be here soon—in a month.'

'Yes; about a month.'

Alice's tone and manner were certainly most discouraging.

'You are like my child now, Alice,' continued Mr Clifford; 'you know I must be answerable for what you are going to do. If you were to be confirmed without being properly prepared, it would be my fault.'

Alice did not understand, and answered that she supposed she should be prepared after she had attended all the examinations.

'It is not the preparation of the intellect which I am speaking of,' replied Mr Clifford, 'but the preparation of the heart.'

A sudden light dawned upon Alice's mind, and made her very

Digitized by Google

uncomfortable. Could Mr Clifford possibly mean that she was not fit to be confirmed. She played with the pebbles on the shore, and made no answer.

'You must let me be plain with you, my dear Alice,' was Mr Clifford's next observation; 'as your clergyman should be. I am anxious about you.'

Alice murmured that he was very kind.

'I am afraid you will not think it kind when you comprehend me,' he replied.

Alice started, but recovered herself instantly, and said haughtily, that she supposed Lady Catharine had been finding fault with her.

'No, indeed, Alice, you are mistaken. Lady Catharine says nothing but what I can myself see. You are arrived at the proper age for confirmation; but it is quite possible that you may not be in the proper state of mind.'

Alice answered that she should be glad to know what the particular things were which Lady Catharine complained of.

'I have told you before,' replied Mr Clifford, in a severe tone, 'that Lady Catharine does not make particular complaints. What we both fear is, that you have not sufficiently realised the greatness of the work before you, and therefore have not summoned sufficient strength of will to perform it. Will you tell me one thing? I have given you, at different times, directions as to your private preparation for confirmation—have you attended to them?'

'I began,' said Alice, finding herself obliged to speak.

'You began, but you did not go on; that may possibly do for your amusements, but it will not do for your religion. The very essence of religion is, that it should be unchanging—the fixed devotion of the heart for life.'

Alice made no answer.

'We will think a little more upon this subject,' continued Mr Clifford. 'Persons who do great works make themselves thoroughly acquainted with their object. I think if you were to understand better what is required of you as a Christian, you might be persuaded that it will not be sufficient to begin, but that you must have resolution to go on and labour.'

Alice answered that she thought she knew what a Christian ought to be.

'I doubt it,' he replied; 'but you shall tell me what your ideas are.'

Digitized by Google

'I think people ought to be very good,' said Alice.

'But that is so vague; I should like to hear more in detail.'

He waited for the next observation, but Alice only looked confused, and began twisting and playing with a bunch of sea-weed upon the rock near her.

'Well, then,' said Mr Clifford, after a silence of some moments, 'since you cannot explain your notions of your duties, will you let me explain mine? I will begin with the easiest—those which you and I, and we all, owe to ourselves and our fellow-creatures. Suppose we take them in the order in which the Church puts them. A person then desirous of doing his duty to his neighbour, would be required first of all to love him as himself; now that means, what?' Alice was still silent. 'Shall I say what it would mean for you?' continued Mr Clifford. 'It is better, perhaps, to confine our attention to ourselves in these matters. If you, then, were to make up your mind really and heartily to fulfil your duty to your neighbour, you would be obliged to consult the wishes of all about you; to give up your own fancies and pleasures, and think of suiting theirs; and this, not only with regard to persons set over you, but all persons; your friends and companions—your servants even, so far as never to give them unnecessary trouble, never to disturb their comforts, and to try and sympathise in their sorrows and their joys. In all cases, where there was any doubt as to what you should do, you would be obliged to put yourself in the place of others, and judge honestly as to what they might reasonably demand of you; any bias in your own favour would be a fault. Your duty would also be to look upon the friend whom God has given you in the place of your parents with the greatest reverence; to love her, to obey her—implicitly, constantly, without murmuring, in the smallest particular as well as the most important. You would be greatly to blame if she were in any way to be made unhappy or uncomfortable by your neglect.'

Alice almost groaned, so heavy was her sigh; but Mr Clifford took no notice.

'Besides domestic duties,' he continued, 'you would be required to pay respect to all persons in authority. You ought never to speak lightly even of those who seem quite removed from you. It may seem unnecessary to tell you to honour the Queen, yet I am afraid you would think it no harm to repeat idle, disrespectful stories about her, if they happened to be

Digitized by Google

amusing, although this would certainly be a fault; and the same may be said, even more strongly, with regard to those who have spiritual power—bishops, clergymen in general. It is a very serious evil when persons indulge in irreverence of the kind. They will not take advice from those whom they have been accustomed to ridicule; and as your words should be reverent, so should your manner be also,' added Mr Clifford, laying a particular stress upon the sentence, a stress which Alice could not but interpret, from the consciousness of her own sulkiness at that very time. 'Even so far you would require very constant watchfulness to keep you right, I suspect,' he continued.

Alice assented, though she could not bring herself to make a remark of her own.

'There are other duties, seemingly easier ones,' pursued Mr Clifford, 'which the love of our neighbour requires; but even these are not so easy as we are apt to imagine. We may be kind-hearted and amiable; but it will be difficult never, under any provocation, to hurt any one, by a cross look or a cross word; and we may have no temptation to be dishonest, but it will require care never to take an unfair advantage of other persons' ignorance; never to profit at their expense; always to pay strictly what is due from us, whether it is asked for or not. Temptations of this kind come upon us when we are not prepared, and in a great many shapes. So, again, with regard to malice and hatred: they are such harsh terms, that at first sight we are apt to think they cannot possibly apply to us; but a really earnest Christian knows that even a wish for revenge is forbidden by them.'

Mr Clifford paused, and Alice said—

'No one is so very good; no one can be.'

'Yet even now our Christian duties are not at an end,' continued Mr Clifford. 'There must be no attempt, in any way, to appropriate to ourselves what is not justly our due; no careless speaking; no unkind amusing stories repeated; no censure upon others pronounced when not called for; no giving persons credit for low motives; no pleasure in hearing evil reports; and no encouragement given to those who are clever in turning others into ridicule. So also there must be exact truth in all our conversation; no exaggeration; no pretence of knowing what we are ignorant of. There must be strict watchfulness and self-denial in such common things as eating and drinking,

Digitized by Google

especially at the appointed times. We must always consider the pleasure and the needs of others before our own; and never indulge in wishes for luxuries. Then again, with regard to purity and simplicity of heart; if you once determine to dedicate yourself to God's service you must not allow an imagination of evil to rest in your mind for a single instant. You must never be curious to hear or read tales of scandal; if they are told you, you must turn from them, though you may be never so deeply interested in them; and when such things are brought before you in books, you must never let your thoughts dwell upon them; you must never, indeed, read books that you know have such tendencies.'

Alice remembered a certain practice which she had lately allowed herself, of studying the newspaper when Lady Catharine was not in the room, without any regard to the subjects mentioned in it. She had done so from mere idle curiosity; but Mr Clifford's warning was not heard without a pang of self-reproach.

'And beyond all, Alice,' he continued, 'you must keep a guard over your heart, lest it should lead you to desire riches, or rank, or advantages which God has not given you. You must work diligently, if not to gain your own daily bread—which has been mercifully provided for you—at least to assist others in gaining theirs, by teaching the ignorant and helping those who are in need; and you must submit your will so entirely to the will of God, that whatever may be your condition in life, whatever your trials, you may never feel a momentary discontent, nor utter a word of repining. Now,' he added, 'we have gone through one half of a Christian's duties, and that half the least difficult.'

'Then I am sure I had better not be confirmed,' exclaimed Alice; 'for I shall never perform a quarter of them.'

'Seriously—you think so?' inquired Mr Clifford.

'Yes, I had better not. I should only make a false promise.'

'Well, then, we will consider that your mind is made up upon the subject; in what condition will you be then?'

'Not worse than I was before,' said Alice, in a tone of perverseness.

'Nay, that can hardly be. To refuse to be confirmed is to refuse the vow of allegiance to God. It is saying that, although you were made his child at baptism, you do not wish to remain

Digitized by Google

so now that you are grown up. Alice, if you are not a child of God, whose child are you?' Mr Clifford's voice was so solemn that Alice trembled. 'Indeed, indeed, Alice,' he continued, 'it is a fearful mistake we make when we imagine that we can in such a case be as we were before. There is no neutral ground upon which we may stand. There is no middle state offered us! the children of God are the heirs of heaven, and the children of God only.'

Alice burst into tears.

'I would speak to you in gentler terms if I dared, my dear Alice,' continued Mr Clifford, taking her hand kindly: 'but I am a minister of God; your soul has been entrusted to my charge; the wavering state of your mind is one full of danger, and I must warn you.'

'But it is impossible. I can never do what is required,' exclaimed Alice, and she rested her forehead upon her hand and sobbed.

'Alice,' said Mr Clifford, 'I have placed the strictness of religion before you, because I believed you had never properly considered it. Once resolve to strive after it; once let me see that you have a hearty will, and I should speak very differently.'

'To will what I can never do,' said Alice.

'Imagine yourself in a different position,' replied Mr Clifford. 'Fancy yourself giving directions to a child. When you formed your rules, you would know they could not perfectly be kept; yet that would not prevent you from making them. You would not, for instance, say to a child, "I will allow you to be a little passionate; to be deceitful perhaps twice in the day. You shall only be required to be obedient at certain hours."'

Alice smiled a little.

'You would require it to be good,' said Mr Clifford; 'goodness meaning not the never doing wrong, but the steadfast determination to try always to do right. God is our Father, Alice; we are his children. He gives us a perfect law. He asks of us what we would ask of a child—when our promise is made and kept, He accepts us and rewards us; if we break it and repent, He pardons us; when we strive ever so feebly, He blesses us, and helps us to strive more; and because it is absolutely impossible that by any obedience of our own we could ever deserve heaven, He assures us that if we will only trust and love Him, He will one day bring us there for the sake of Him who has borne the punishment which was our due. Alice, can you still refuse to own yourself God's child?'

Digitized by Google

'I wish—I wish,' began Alice.

'Then, my dear Alice, turn your wish into a prayer.'

'I always do pray,' said Alice, in a tone of self-defence.

'That is, you always say your prayers morning and evening. What I mean is something far beyond—prayer constantly from the heart.'

'I never know how,' said Alice, 'and I should go on just the same. I never could keep on being good.'

'Alice, in pity to yourself, do not say that; it is a miserable persuasion to begin life with.'

'It is true—it is quite true,' exclaimed Alice, passionately. 'I thought I might be better when I was confirmed, and now you will not let me be.'

'No,' replied Mr Clifford; 'I have never said you should not be confirmed. I have merely doubted whether you were fit for it in your present state of mind. Once let me see that you are in earnest, and it would not give me more pleasure to hear my own children renew the promises of their baptism, than it would to hear you. You little know how deeply I am interested for you.'

Alice folded her hands, and a look of settled despondency rested on her features.

'Prayer,' said Mr Clifford—'that is your great hope—prayer constantly.'

And again Alice said, 'I have prayed.'

'And you despair?' said Mr Clifford.

'Yes.'

'Then listen to me once more. There are solemn duties before you; you think them beyond you—have you never performed them at all?'

'Never,' said Alice. 'I was never good.'

'Think,' he continued. 'You own that you have duties; if you were thoroughly wicked you would not see them. More than that, you have a wish to do right; the wish is a special gift of God. You say your prayers—let them be never so cold and formal, still the habit is a good one; it shows that you do not desire to throw off religion. You admire those who are good; persons for whom there is no hope, scoff at goodness. You are willing to be confirmed, because you are told to be so; that at least is an obedient spirit. We will sum up these points. God, then, has given you a wish to serve Him—a habit of outward religion—a heart to admire goodness—a spirit of obedience to a certain extent. These are the germs of the holiness of a saint; they want but one thing more, and they may lead to it.'

Digitized by Google

Mr Clifford paused, and Alice slowly raised her eyes to his, and listened with breathless attention.

'They want the will to make them so,' he added. 'All that we ask in prayer, believing, we shall have. Ask for the will and it will be granted you. Ask it especially now, at this season; it may be the turning-point of your life. Once gone, it may never return. There are two roads before you: one is the broad road that leadeth to destruction, the other is the narrow way that leadeth unto life. Alice, it was the narrow way which your mother chose; she travelled it in weariness and pain; she is resting now in the home of peace in which it ends.'

Alice averted her face. She would fain have continued to appear indifferent, but it was impossible.

'You can follow,' continued Mr Clifford.

Alice shook her head.

'You can follow,' he repeated. 'You have trusted to yourself and you have failed. Trust to your Saviour, and you must succeed.'

'Never; it is so hard,' persisted Alice; but her tone was more yielding.

'Hard and impossible by nature; yet our Lord says that His yoke is easy and His burden light. His words must be true.'

'Yes, for others.'

'For you and every one. Pray for the will to serve Him and He will give it you; and with the will He will also grant the power. He will grant it especially at your confirmation; only be in earnest, and it is impossible that you should be disappointed.'

Alice looked up in doubt. 'But I must wait for confirmation?' she said.

'You shall think upon the subject by yourself, and tell me your own wishes another day,' replied Mr Clifford. 'I would rather give no decision at present.'

He rose to return home. Alice put her arm within his, and, as if by mutual consent, they walked on in silence.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XLVI.

JUSTINE LE VERGNIER'S character, since the time of her dismissal from the society of Mrs Carter's school, had been rapidly forming, and at the age of seventeen she possessed the decision and determination of many a woman of five-and-twenty. She had been thrown upon her own resources, and forced in many instances to act independently; and, however indifferent she might profess herself to be, as to the turn which events might take, she had in fact fully made up her mind with regard to her own course, and was determined to pursue it at all hazards.

Justine had no intention of remaining a governess all her life. She had formed schemes for a much more brilliant, and, as it appeared to her, a happier lot. Justine had friends, or, more properly speaking, intimate acquaintances, thoughtless and unprincipled, whose society she had encouraged against the advice of her father and Mrs Carter. They had led her into dissimulation, and great neglect of duty whilst she was in her former situation, and this being discovered, caused her dismissal. Still Justine would not give them up. She believed that her intercourse with them would at last end in her being married and settled independently; and notwithstanding the grave warnings of Mrs Carter, and the urgent entreaties of her father, she still continued a correspondence, and took every opportunity of seeing them. These friends were now in France; they would probably remain there a long time. It was possible even that they might not return. When Justine learned this, her resolution to follow them was at once taken. This was the clue to all she was now doing—her reason for thrusting herself upon the notice of Florence Trevelyan, insinuating herself into her friendship, and making such efforts to obtain the situation of governess in Mrs De Lacy's family. It was for her own convenience. Mrs De Lacy was a weak-minded, good-natured person. Florence was very like her. They were going to France, and the opportunity of accompanying them was advantageous to Justine's plans. Her expenses would be paid, she would have but little to do, and by exercising the influence over Florence which she already possessed, she might, it seemed, without difficulty, engage her in assisting her further views. All this was scheming, low-minded, and utterly without a thought of duty. Justine was

Digitized by Google

young to have been led so far astray; but the progress of evil is fearfully swift when it is begun early; and Justine had pursued a course of self-education, which is sure to be destructive of all right moral principle. She had read, heard, and thought of evil, till she had almost ceased to know that it was evil. The day-dreams in which Alice was once described as indulging were the constant occupation of Justine's thoughts. She lived in a gay but sinful world of her own creating. In the midst of apparent occupation, she was still busy with her own fancies; and in hours of leisure she fed her imagination with books of the most pernicious kind. Justine's reading was indiscriminate. It mattered not what was the nature of the novels—however offensive to right feeling and good taste might be the scenes described—if they were only exciting, told in powerful language, and rousing deep interest, Justine was satisfied. She read them eagerly, thought of them, dreamt of them, and often supposed herself acting a principal part in the wickedness (for it was wickedness, however it might be disguised) which had been delineated in the characters of others. Is Justine's case singular?

It was fortunate for Florence Trevelyan that these schemes were too important to be entrusted to her. Justine, indeed, made use of her, but she took care not to let her see that she did so. Such companionship, however, did Florence a great deal of harm. It taught her to speak lightly of things which were in themselves most sinful. It accustomed her to look upon evil as a matter of course; to suppose that all persons were alike, though some might appear better than others. Florence was not insensible to the influence of good, but Justine was teaching her to distrust its existence. She was so clever in detecting faults, and had such an amusing way of turning virtues into ridicule, that Florence could not but listen to and believe her.

'So you have had no answer from Mrs Clifford,' said Justine, as she and Florence walked up and down the veranda together, a few days after the invitation to the picnic had been sent.

'There was no occasion for one,' replied Florence; 'the engagement was made before, and my aunt merely wrote to fix the day. It is to be her party, in fact, though it is called a picnic.'

'And there will be—how many?' asked Justine.

Florence ran over a long list of names, ending with, 'It will

Digitized by Google

be charming if we have only fine weather, and if Ruth will not be crotchety.'

'What is that you call it?' said Justine; 'it is a good word, just the word for Ruth. Crotchet—crooked that means, doesn't it; troublesome? that is exactly like her. But I am not much afraid of her.'

'I never can understand you when you are speaking of Ruth,' said Florence. 'You used to say how good she was.'

'Good! oh yes! every one is good.'

'Nonsense, Justine, you don't mean that.'

'Yes, every one is good when it suits.'

Florence looked shocked.

'Now, not such a face as that, mignonne,' said Justine, playfully. 'You know I don't mean to talk scandal. Ruth is a paragon, but it is not for nothing; do you see?'

'No, I don't see at all,' said Florence shortly. 'I always admired Ruth.'

'Ah! to be sure. Admire her if you will; dress her up, call her a queen, put on her a crown; but then, mark me'—Justine held up her finger with an arch smile—'Ruth likes the crown.'

'Well! so we all should,' observed Florence.

'Of course, so we all should; I said it. You and I talk, sing, and play to Mrs De Lacy; we are patterns; very sweet, very good-natured—she calls us angels. Then she takes us to France: we are content. Ruth says prayers, and reads sermons; she teaches dirty children, and cuts out baby frocks, and all the time she looks so'—and Justine folded her hands, and put on an absurd, demure face, at which Florence burst into a fit of laughter; 'then people say, Ah! she is a saint! Miss Ruth, she is so good. Ruth knows she is praised; that is for her like going to France; she is content.' Florence still laughed.

'It is true; now say so,' continued Justine.

'True! yes, perhaps. I wish you would not look so absurd,' exclaimed Florence. 'But we have forgotten one thing all this time; if you are to go to the picnic with us we shall meet Mrs Clifford and Madeline as well as Ruth, and then what is to become of us?'

'Nay, we are safe from Mrs Clifford and Lady Catharine too. Mrs Carter was kind enough in one way; she never told more tales than she could help; so they will not think about me if Ruth is silent.'

Digitized by Google

'But if we were sure of that,' said Florence,—'there is Madeline.'

'Ah! but I always took it for granted that "la petite" had no will of her own. If we gained Ruth I thought there was no danger.'

'That was if Ruth was quite firm in our cause; but she is not. She says in her letter that she does not mean to keep her promise, and that I had much better break off all acquaintance with you;—as if I should do such a thing!'

'As if you would do such a thing indeed!' repeated Justine, caressingly.

'But,' continued Florence, 'we must think about this. I don't feel at all sure that you will not be obliged to stay at home. I should not have cared about Lady Catharine and Mrs Clifford any more than you, if Ruth and Madeline had been friends with us; but I doubt very much now whether it will do to run the risk.'

'Mais pourquoi?' inquired Justine. 'If we come over Ruth that will be all. Madeline is a nobody.'

'Hem!' said Florence. 'Madeline has queer ways of her own.'

'But she is so simple, so good-natured.'

Florence still looked doubtful. 'Just remember one thing, Justine,' she said; 'at school do you recollect that little business about the brooch?'

'Ah, oui, assurément; but what then? She was a baby; she did not know any better.'

'I would not answer for her,' said Florence. 'Madeline won't be come over.'

'Trust me,' said Justine, 'I would turn her. You laugh; but I would—I would turn her round my little finger.'

'How?' inquired Florence.

'I would talk of good-nature; of being kind. I would beg her, as she loved me, not to mention Mrs Carter. There are a hundred ways.'

'You may try; but I doubt.'

'Then you think her better than Ruth?' said Justine.

'No, I don't; at least I never think about her. I only know what Alice said.'

'Alice! what was that?

'When I first mentioned you to Alice, I asked her whether she thought Ruth and Madeline would keep the secret.'

Digitized by Google

'Well?' exclaimed Justine, impatiently.

'Alice thought Ruth would,' continued Florence. 'She said that Ruth always listened to reason; but she had a doubt about Madeline, because Madeline never cared for reason.'

'Ah! quelle folie!' exclaimed Justine. 'I hoped she had been wiser.'

'No, she is not. Alice says she is even worse than when she left school. If you remember, she had a way then of turning away when one talked to her. I don't know what it is in her, but she never seems to care for what other people care for.'

'Not for being a queen, like that sober Ruth?' said Justine, laughing.

'No, one never could make her care; it was all the same who went before her. If Ruth and she were put down in the classes, Ruth used to stalk down to the bottom with such an air! I have often laughed to see her; but Madeline took it all quite quietly.'

'That has nothing to do with the picnic,' observed Justine.

'Yes, it has, somehow—I forget what I meant exactly—but it had something to do with it. Oh! I remember. Don't you see that there is no coming over Madeline, because she is so stupid?'

'Then she will do as Ruth tells her; she will not think for herself.'

'I doubt; Maddy is obstinate. The day we first met her at the church, she would insist upon having her own way about not coming here—and she had it too. She did not come into the house.'

'Happily for me,' said Justine.

'Yes, happily for you: but if she sees you now at the picnic, it will not be happily for you or for me either.'

Justine shrugged her shoulders. 'Bien! we will hope—I don't fear.'

'But if you were to stay away,' suggested Florence, timidly. 'After the picnic there will be no danger. My aunt said yesterday, she meant to set off in a very few days.'

Justine's lively face assumed rather a melancholy expression at the proposal. Whether she would have agreed to it or not is uncertain; for just then the question was set at rest by the appearance of Mrs De Lacy, with the intelligence that Mrs Clifford and Ruth intended to join the party to St Cuthbert's; but that, for some unexplained reason, Madeline would remain

Digitized by Google

at home. Justine clapped her hands in glee when she and Florence were again left together, and began dancing round the room, singing a French song, and stopping at intervals to declare that she was born under a fortunate star—she was always sure of getting out of difficulties—she was certain all would go just as they wished. Care! there was no such thing as care. Florence had seldom seen her in such high spirits. The mirth was infectious; it caught Mrs De Lacy's ears, and she returned to the drawing-room. Justine exerted herself more and more to be agreeable, and Mrs De Lacy, fascinated by her agreeable manners and quick talent, came to the conclusion, before the day was over, that she would no longer hesitate to engage Justine le Vergnier, to be a companion for herself and a governess for her child.

CHAPTER XLVII.

ALICE returned to the Manor, after her evening walk with Mr Clifford, in a different frame of mind from that in which she had left it. She was subdued, saddened; pride and resentment were no longer striving in the same degree for the mastery over her better feelings. Alice was, as Mr Clifford had described her when speaking to Lady Catharine, candid; and this candour was the groundwork of much good. Whilst Mr Clifford was talking, she was indeed cold, and now and then even repulsive in her manner; but his words sank into her heart, and she owned their truth. Still Alice did not condemn herself without casting some reproach upon others. She thought of her school-days, and remembered her evil companions—her errors might in some degree be attributed to them; and now—Alice was fully occupied in dwelling upon this 'now,' as she walked home from the Parsonage, followed by the butler, who had been sent to take care of her. Now, there were many things to try her; many circumstances to render her duties disagreeable and discouraging. The duties in themselves might be easy to others, but they could never, she imagined, be so to her.

These thoughts were crowding upon her mind as she passed the lodge gate, and entered the avenue. The house, at its extremity, looked cheerless in the bright moonlight, for the win-

Digitized by Google

dows appeared like so many closed eyes, and there were no lights to be seen, except from a small pantry window, crossed with iron bars. Alice's heart sank as she drew near. The Parsonage, notwithstanding its low rooms and worn furniture, possessed infinitely greater charms in her eyes than the handsome Manor House, whilst the pride she had once felt in her position, as Lady Catharine's adopted child, and the expectation of an ample, if not a large fortune, was fast melting away under the influence of daily vexations. Alice was not altogether to blame in these feelings. God does not see fit to give us all the same blessings in our youth. Many He places in homes where they find little sympathy and great trials. It is not true that childhood and youth are always the happiest seasons of life. Alice Lennox had much to bear. Her warm affections were frequently chilled; her freedom was checked; the natural impulses of her age and disposition were thwarted. She was like a bird confined in a cage, and fluttering vainly against the wires, in the longing desire to escape.

The desire was not in itself wrong; and this was Alice's temptation and her difficulty. She walked on slowly, unwilling to reach the grave old Manor House, associated as it was with ideas of constraint, coldness, and formality, and feeling herself depressed even to tears. Now and then she stopped to watch the effects of the pale, gleaming light upon the trunks, and beneath the branches of the beech-trees in the avenue; or bent down to look at a glow-worm shining from amongst the moss and turf. She was free then—free till she had passed the heavy barred door, which at that moment seemed the entrance to a prison. Why—the thought crossed her mind with a sharp pang—why could she not remain so? The answer, or at least the thought which could have satisfied her, might have been suggested at that moment, if Alice had had the heart and the understanding to discover it. As she pursued her way, the moon passed from behind a cloud, and shed a flood of light upon her path. Alice's eye was attracted by it, she looked up to the sky, studded with myriads of stars; a few dark shadows were passing across it, edged with silver by the moonbeams, but they were no barrier. She could pass beyond them, and rest her glance upon worlds more distant than imagination could realise. Infinity was above her, boundless space around her; but she was not free to travel through it. She was placed upon a speck in the universe, born into one small world,

Digitized by Google

kept a prisoner in a corner of that world; she was constantly reminded that it was not in her power to do all she wished, by the feeling of fatigue, by weather, by events over which she had no control, by the very formation of her body; yet it had never entered Alice's mind to murmur because she was a human being. As she was formed, so she was contented to remain. God's will was her will in these things—at least she had never thought of rebelling against it. She never strove to be free; to fly through the air, or walk upon the water; and therefore she was not fretted by the impossibility. When we have learned this same lesson in our several positions in life; when God's will has become our will, so that we have no wish beyond our station; no desire to escape from the trials He sends; no longings but for the daily bread and the daily comforts which He in His wisdom apportions us; then we are free.

Alice had a hard lesson to learn, but it is well to 'bear the yoke in our youth;' for so we are prepared for the restraints to which (if we hope for happiness) we must be accustomed in age.

But the door was reached. Alice stood upon the steps, and cast one lingering melancholy glance upon the beauty of the moonlight evening before she entered the hall, which was gloomy from its size, and the dark colour of the wainscot, notwithstanding the light from the large glass lamp that hung suspended from the ceiling. Lady Catharine, she was told, was in the breakfast-room; her usual sitting-room when alone. A disagreeable recollection of the manner in which they last parted came upon Alice rather suddenly. She had been dreaming for the last quarter of an hour; now she was to prepare herself for reality. Lady Catharine was sitting with her back to the door reading, when Alice came in. She thought it was only the servant bringing an answer to some message, and she did not look up. Alice advanced to the table, took off her gloves, and untied her bonnet, before Lady Catharine raised her eyes.

Then she said, 'Oh! my dear, are you returned? is it a fine evening?'

'Yes, ma'am, very.'

'You must have had a pleasant walk.'

'Yes, ma'am, very.'

'Did Mr Clifford come with you?'

'No, ma'am.'

Digitized by Google

A pause. Alice unpinned her shawl.

'Shall I take my things off before prayers?' she asked.

'Yes, you had better.'

Alice lighted a candle and departed. When she came down the bell was rung; the servants assembled in the ante-room to the drawing-room, Lady Catharine sat down to a small table, and read a chapter from a large family Bible. Alice sat by her, with her eyes bent upon her own Bible, and her thoughts wandering in innumerable directions. Then followed prayers, then a kiss, and then separation for the night.

Alice was very unhappy when she went to bed, from several causes; Mr Clifford's conversation, Lady Catharine's coldness, and a misgiving that her troubles were not entirely independent of herself. But Lady Catharine was equally so; she had expected some advance from Alice, some allusion to the morning vexations, which should give an opening to the words, 'I forgive;' but Alice appeared insensible and forgetful. Lady Catharine owned the truth of a great deal which Mr Clifford had suggested, but it could never, she thought, be desirable to show cordiality unless there were some symptoms of repentance. She could not resolve upon what line of conduct to adopt. Mr Clifford's ideas were contrary to all her early prejudices, and though she bore with the mention of them, as she knew they appeared to him to be right, she could not in a moment throw off her own plans and pursue his. And with Lady Catharine, as with Alice, there was a difficulty in the way of perceiving her errors, from the fact that Alice was really in fault—that she really was negligent and self-willed. But neither was Lady Catharine aware of the effect of her own manner. She did not mean to be chilling or formal; but the manner had been allowed to grow up in youth unchecked, and now it was a part of her very nature. As a girl, she had been accustomed to say, 'I know I am proud; I cannot help being reserved; I daresay people think me very cold;' all the time with a certain satisfaction in being proud, and cold, and reserved, from an idea that she was therefore unlike ordinary persons. No one had said to her that proud, cold manners were greatly to be lamented and struggled against; that they were great defects, and symptoms of an evil nature: no one had warned her that reserve, when indulged, is apt to degenerate into want of consideration for the feelings of our friends; and that, when we shut ourselves up, and fancy that others cannot understand us, we too

Digitized by Google

often do not take the trouble to understand them. Coldness and reserve are not the characteristics of a Christian. Without reference to the One Perfect Example of infinite charity, we can scarcely imagine St Paul repelling, when the disciples threw themselves upon his neck and wept, 'sorrowing most of all that they should see his face no more.' And when St John gave his last touching exhortation, 'Little children, love one another,' surely the tone and manner must have been winning even as the words, for they were the tone and manner of him 'whom Jesus loved.'

But Lady Catharine's austerity was now almost beyond correction. It might be softened, but there was little hope of its ever being eradicated. The best that could be expected was, that her excellent qualities, her sincerity, earnestness, and genuine benevolence, might exercise so great an influence as to induce those with whom she associated to overlook the occasional harshness of her manner. Alice was too young, too selfish, too impatient, to do this; and, above all, she was not yet sufficiently humble.

No, Alice was not really humble, even on that evening when she had been listening to Mr Clifford's advice, and had been warned that she was not fit for confirmation. A repining spirit cannot be a humble one. When we have learned to know ourselves, we shall never murmur. Sinners by nature—helpless, hopeless; offending daily and hourly, after grace given for the present, and boundless happiness offered for the future, what claim have we to any blessings? If Alice's lot in life had been ten times more trying, she would still have had cause for the gratitude of every moment of her existence. But she could not see this. She fancied her conduct excused by circumstances, and when she reflected on all which Mr Clifford had said, her meditations took the form of an examination of Lady Catharine's conduct, and her resolution was to be better if Lady Catharine would be kinder. God does not accept such resolutions. We must be good under any circumstances—tempted or not tempted, happy or not happy.

They met at breakfast the next morning, still with constraint on both sides. Alice fearing and wondering whether Mr Clifford had positively proposed to Lady Catharine to delay her confirmation. Lady Catharine pondering how to break through the ice of Alice's reserve. Lady Catharine began a conversation several times, and extracted in reply that Alice had spent a

Digitized by Google

quiet day at the Parsonage, seen no one, and only walked on the shore. No parish news; no remarks about the school; no mention of any chance visitor. Alice was as short and correct in her answers as if she had been placed in a witness box. Lady Catharine tried another subject—Mrs De Lacy's visit. Alice showed little interest in it, except by once asking for Florence. Lady Catharine believed she was quite well. A young lady was staying with her; that was the reason she had not accompanied her aunt. Then Alice's eyes brightened, as if the subject was not quite indifferent to her; but Lady Catharine was not quick in remarking slight variations of countenance.

'I think Mrs De Lacy said she was French,' continued Lady Catharine. 'I am not fond myself of intimacies with foreigners. They are all alike, educated frivolously.'

Alice could not bear this sweeping censure, and observed that she supposed some might be better.

'That is because you don't know them, my dear. I should be sorry for you to be thrown in the way of them.'

Alice did not venture to allude to Justine le Vergnier.

'By the by,' added Lady Catharine, 'it is rather strange—I wonder'—— She finished her sentence in her own mind, and immediately began to finish her breakfast also; deliberately—she was never hurried out of her sense of propriety in all things—yet with that air of determination which shows that persons are not intending to spend more time upon what they are doing than can be avoided. On rising from the table, Alice was told to ring the bell, that the breakfast things might be removed; to send word to the gardener that Lady Catharine desired to speak with him in a quarter of an hour precisely; to go herself and arrange some fresh flowers in the drawing-room vases—a duty which Alice always performed directly after breakfast—then to walk on the terrace for three quarters of an hour, and on her re-entrance to read history for an hour, and write any letters which might be necessary. Also to beg Marsham to give her some articles of dress which were not in good repair, and which she had better mend before she finished her crochet bag; also—but Lady Catharine could not remember any more 'alsos,' though she stood thinking for several seconds. Alice did not stand at all. The moment Lady Catharine was gone she rushed away—ran up the stairs, two steps at a time—hurried along the gallery, and having reached her own room,

Digitized by Google

slammed the door, bolted it, and walked up and down in a state of fretful irritation. It was unfortunate that Alice had no one to remind her—that she had not the sense to remind herself—of the fact that the duties imposed upon her were very simple and easily performed; that if she had been left to herself, she could scarcely have portioned out her morning better, the sole fault to be found with the arrangement being that it had been made for her instead of by her. Alice had only to subdue her own will, and all discomfort would have been at an end. The duties, however, must, she knew, be performed; and so they were. A short time afterwards, as she returned to her room laden with flowers for the drawing-room vases, she found Lady Catharine there. Alice's mind was still in a storm. Lady Catharine was only quietly grave; as least such was her tone of voice when she said—

'Were you aware, Alice, that Miss Trevelyan had a friend staying with her?'

Alice replied that she had heard so.

'You cannot have seen her,' said Lady Catharine; 'but have you any idea where she comes from?'

'I am not sure where she lives,' said Alice, whilst, sorely against her wishes, the colour rose in her cheeks.

'Mrs De Lacy did not give her name,' said Lady Catharine, 'and you say you have not heard it?'

A sudden jerk of Alice's elbow threw down the jug of water which stood upon the table, and in the confusion which this occasioned she escaped answering the question.

'I daresay you will wonder why I ask,' continued Lady Catharine, with something more of ease; 'but I have received a particular caution from Mrs Carter against your renewing an acquaintance with that Mademoiselle Le Vergnier, whom you knew at school. She has a very bad opinion of her. It was not worth while to mention this before; but hearing of Miss Trevelyan's friend made me think it possible that she might be the same person. Miss Trevelyan would of course have told you if she had been?'

Alice was silent; but the pang of conscience which she endured was almost intolerable.

'I wonder I did not think of asking Mrs De Lacy more about her,' said Lady Catharine, speaking to herself; 'but' (and she sighed) 'I was occupied with other things. Well, my dear, there is no occasion to keep you any longer doing nothing"—for Alice

Digitized by Google

had not yet begun to dress the flowers—'I merely wished to say to you that if Miss Trevelyan should ever offer to introduce you again to that Mademoiselle Le Vergnier, you must remember that both Mrs Carter and I entirely disapprove of the acquaintance. You would, however, of course, tell me directly. And, Alice, I am not particularly desirous of your becoming a great friend of Miss Trevelyan's. Mrs Carter's account does not entirely please me. By and by we will have some of your real friends here.' After the confirmation—Lady Catharine was going to add, but she was checked by a painful remembrance, and turning from the subject abruptly, she said, 'You walked on the shore last night, my dear; was Mr Clifford with you?'

'Yes, ma'am, part of the time.'

'Did he appear in good spirits?'

Alice looked surprised, and answered, 'Yes, ma'am, much the same as usual.'

Lady Catharine seemed inclined to do what for her was very unnatural—to linger in the room without any apparent motive. Alice began arranging the flowers.

'Did Mr Clifford walk with you?' said Lady Catharine, in the same sudden manner, and forgetting that she had put a similar question only a few moments before.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'But with you—with you alone?'

'We sat some time on the shore together,' said Alice, colouring.

'That was what I meant. Had he any opportunity of speaking to you by yourself?'

'We talked,' replied Alice, the slight tinge which had flushed her face becoming a deep crimson.

'I see,' continued Lady Catharine, looking steadily at her, 'Mr Clifford has said to you what he said to me. Alice, can you imagine how grieved I am?'

Alice's heart swelled for an instant with pride, but the tone and the word 'grieved' softened her.

'Mr Clifford did not tell me exactly—he did not say I must not go,' she replied, speaking in a low voice, and in her nervousness undoing all her work, and scattering the flowers upon the table.

For once Lady Catharine omitted to notice her awkwardness. 'But he must have told you,' she said, 'that he had doubts upon the subject; and in such cases a doubt is almost equal to a certainty.'

Digitized by Google

Alice did not see this. She replied coldly, that if Lady Catharine and Mr Clifford both thought it better not, she supposed it would be so.

This answer apparently perplexed Lady Catharine.

'And is your confirmation then a matter of indifference to you, Alice?' she asked.

'I wish to go,' replied Alice, speaking in the same manner.

Lady Catharine seized upon the word 'wish,' and said eagerly, 'If you wished, all would be right. Did you tell Mr Clifford this?'

'Yes.'

Silence followed. Lady Catharine stood before the picture of Mrs Lennox, and as she looked upon it, tears gathered in her cold, gray eyes, but they went no further. Before Alice, in her present mood, she would have felt it humiliation to betray any weakness. Alice glanced at her from time to time. The work in which she was engaged made no progress; the flowers were altered again and again, and the stems cut and re-cut, whilst her thoughts were wandering to her mother and Lady Catharine's affection for her, and conscience was bitterly upbraiding her for her deception about Justine. One word of gentleness, and the barrier of her pride might have been broken down; but it did not come. They had met coldly—they parted coldly. Lady Catharine went to her room without uttering another word, and Alice set about her morning's work, with no interest in it beyond that of merely passing away a few heavy hours, and preventing herself from thinking that she had practically told an untruth. Time did pass away, and Alice, if she had thought at all, might have been grateful to Lady Catharine for giving her so much to do. The luncheon bell rang, and she was surprised that the morning had gone so quickly. It would have been more agreeable to her to escape luncheon altogether; but this was not practicable, and it proved less unpleasant than she had anticipated. Lady Catharine also had been occupied, and in her occupation found less leisure to think about Alice. She brought forward a topic for conversation which was tolerably free from unpleasant associations; but Alice could not be cheerful. She could overlook her ordinary faults; but the miserable deception of which she had been guilty was a weight not to be shaken off. She was thoroughly ashamed of it—more ashamed perhaps than penitent, and could only relieve her mind by thinking that she

Digitized by Google

should, in the course of the afternoon, have an opportunity of telling Ruth, as there was a quarterly examination at the school, to which she was going with Lady Catharine, and where Ruth would certainly be present.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MUCH to the disappointment of Alice, Madeline was at the school instead of her sister A headache kept Ruth at home, and Madeline was obliged to take her place. The afternoon was very warm, and the heat soon became oppressive. After a short time Lady Catharine declared herself unable to bear it any longer; and, leaving Alice with Mr Clifford, she went home. The departure was satisfactory to Alice, who took a part in the examination of one of the classes, and received Mr Clifford's thanks and approval. At any other time this circumstance would have raised her spirits; for such praises were rarely given; but, when they were, they were given heartily. Praise and sympathy went together, and the latter made the former ten times more valuable. Mr Clifford's manner of thanking Alice had also a peculiar meaning in it. Alice understood that he was thinking of what had passed between them the day before, and was pleased to find that in one duty, and that an important one, she had not been remiss.

When the school was dismissed, Madeline congratulated Alice, and begged her, if possible, to come back with her to the Parsonage. Ruth would be delighted, she said, to know that she had been praised by her papa—he was so very particular; and her mamma also would be very glad; it was only a few days before that she had been saying how regular Alice was in going to the school, and that she was a good example to them.

Alice scarcely smiled, though she agreed to return to the Parsonage, hoping that she might be able to have a little conversation with Ruth before the dinner hour at the Manor.

The distance from the school to the Parsonage was but short; but it was lengthened now by Madeline's proposing that they should cross some fields to take a message to a cottager for her papa.

Digitized by Google

Alice made no objection, though she was looking forward to seeing Ruth, as the only hope of relieving her burdened mind.

Madeline was by this time pretty well accustomed to Alice's temper, but her silence on the present occasion certainly puzzled her. She who valued her papa's praises so much, imagined of course that Alice must be happy when she had received them. Madeline had felt rather lonely the last few days; Ruth was grown strangely reserved; her papa had been more thoughtful than usual, and now Alice was what she called in a 'mood.' There was one person, however, whom nothing seemed to alter; and when Madeline caught sight of her mamma standing at the cottage door as they came up, she ran up to her with delight.

Madeline went into the cottage, and Mrs Clifford and Alice remained together. The coldest person must have been struck by Mrs Clifford's manner; so affectionate and sympathising, and full of consideration. Even when she merely asked whether Alice was going to the Parsonage, she contrived to give an interest to her words. The simple question was not put as a matter of course, it evidently implied that she wished her to go. The charm of Mrs Clifford's character consisted not only in the absence of all selfishness, but in the power of throwing herself, as it were, into the minds of those with whom she held intercourse; seeing with their eyes, hearing with their ears, and, in consequence, giving real sympathy in cases where it would seem she could not naturally be at all concerned.

Mrs Clifford had taught herself this habit of mind. She was indeed born with an affectionate, gentle temper, but she had improved it by watchfulness. One command given in the Bible made a great impression upon her when she was quite young. It was St Paul's exhortation to the Romans to 'rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.' She heard sympathy generally spoken of as a gift, or disposition of the heart, like warmth of feeling; but she perceived that this was not St Paul's view of it. If it could not be attained by practice, it would not be commanded. Mrs Clifford did practise. She began at once, in the minute affairs of every day; whether it were choosing a dress, or reading a book, or laying out a flower-bed; whatever came before her, as occupying the attention of those she lived with, was (though not without an effort at first) forced to engage her attention also. Now, this disposition of mind was brought to bear upon really important

Digitized by Google

subjects, and perhaps not even Mr Clifford, with his zeal, firmness, and power of mind, possessed as much influence over his parishioners as did his gentle wife, when she sat by their lowly firesides, listening to their tales of suffering, leading them to tell their secret trials, and at last leaving them with perhaps a very few words of advice, and scarcely any of reproof, but with the assurance so touching to us all: 'Yes, I can quite understand; it must be very sad—very hard to bear; we will think about it, and see if something cannot be done.'

Mrs Clifford could and would have been a constant support to Alice in her home trials; but under Alice's peculiar circumstances there was a great difficulty. If Alice was to be happy, Lady Catharine must be her chief object of respect and affection. Mrs Clifford might win her affections, but this would only make her uncomfortable by withdrawing her interest from the person in whom it ought to be centred.

It was probable, also, that Lady Catharine might be of a jealous disposition, especially where she had so few to love; and if this feeling were once roused, Alice would inevitably be wretched. All these considerations made Mrs Clifford very guarded in their intercourse; and yet it was impossible to watch Alice, and know her faults and her trials, without great pity, and an earnest desire to be of service to her. Many of Ruth's suggestions were the result of previous conversation with her mamma; and often, when Mrs Clifford was busy or wearied, she would exert herself to talk to her own children about Alice, hoping through them to do good, without awakening any irritable feeling on the part of Lady Catharine.

Just now Mrs Clifford was peculiarly compassionate towards Alice. She knew what had been said regarding her confirmation, and she understood better than her husband all that Alice would have to bear, both from her own regret and Lady Catharine's displeasure, if the delay was to be insisted on. It struck her immediately that Alice looked pale, and she inquired as tenderly as if speaking to one of her own children, whether she was tired; adding, 'I am afraid Mr Clifford has kept you too long at the school, my dear; and Madeline was foolish in bringing you so far round.'

Poor Alice's heavy heart received an additional weight from these few kind words. She would not own that she was tired, but said she should like to go to the Parsonage and talk a little to Ruth.

Digitized by Google

'Do, my dear; Ruth will be delighted. You will find her in my dressing-room, lying on the sofa; her head is better now.'

Alice looked with some impatience at the cottage-door, wondering that Madeline did not come out.

'You are in a hurry, are you not, my love? You want to see Ruth, and go back to the Manor in time to dress for dinner. I will hurry Madeline;' and Mrs Clifford entered the cottage.

Alice remained at the door, not exactly listening to what was said, but gathering a vague impression of some more kind words —some further thought for the comfort of others. Mrs Clifford appeared more lovable than ever, and Alice longed—how earnestly! how sadly! that such a mother had been granted to herself. Madeline came out full of excitement at the wonderful recovery of a sick child, a particular favourite of hers; and Mrs Clifford would not check her at first, but when her energy had a little subsided, she said—

'Madeline, dear, you have brought Alice too far; she is tired; take her home the short way, and then leave her with Ruth for a little while to rest. And, Alice,' she added, 'do you think that Lady Catharine would spare you to us again the day after to-morrow? We have not seen you as often lately as I like.'

Alice was only too glad of the invitation, though a little afraid of another *tête-à-tête* with Mr Clifford. They were to separate now, as Mrs Clifford had business in a contrary direction. Madeline was told to order some broth for the child when she reached home—an order which pleased her in itself, and reminded her that her mamma cared for those whom she cared for; and Alice was kissed, and begged to bring a bright colour in her cheek the day after to-morrow, or they should have to prescribe for her also.

'Let Ruth and Alice be quiet together, my dear Madeline,' was Mrs Clifford's last injunction; 'and keep watch for Alice, that she may not be late in going back.'

'Are you not well, Alice?' said Madeline, when her mamma had left them.

'Yes, tolerably; my head is aching a little, but that is all; it was the heat of the school, I think. My headaches are not like Ruth's.'

'Ruth is quite out of spirits,' observed Madeline: 'in that way she is like you. I cannot think where the spirits of both of you are gone.'

Digitized by Google

'There is nothing to give one spirits that I can see,' replied Alice.

'Ruth is grave about the confirmation sometimes,' said Madeline; 'but that would not make her unhappy, and really now and then she looks as if she could cry.'

'I am not going to the confirmation, Madeline,' said Alice. This was spoken quietly, but Alice's step was hurried. Madeline stopped, and looked at her in perfect incredulity.

'I am not going to the confirmation,' repeated Alice, still hurrying on.

'Not going here, do you mean?—at this place?—Laneton? Shall you be confirmed anywhere else?'

'I shall not be confirmed at all,' continued Alice. 'Your papa says so,' she added, with some bitterness of tone.

'O Alice, how dreadful!'

Madeline did not know how to finish the sentence.

'I cannot help it,' said Alice.

'But don't you care? I cannot understand you; you seem quite changed.'

'I am changed,' exclaimed Alice, passionately. 'I am so miserable; I shall never be happy.'

'Alice, dear! how can you talk so? Please don't hurry on. I would give anything to make you better—happier, I mean. Please, Alice, wait one minute for me.'

They had reached a stile, which divided the field from the premises of the Parsonage. Alice crossed it, but instead of going into the house, she turned into a path which led into the garden. Madeline followed her. They sat down together on a bench in the arbour, at the end of the path, and Madeline saw that Alice was crying bitterly. For a little time Madeline showed her sympathy only by manner; but, at last, she said—

'If we were to go into the house to Ruth, perhaps you would be able to talk to her.'

'I came on purpose,' said Alice. 'I did not mean to say anything to you, Madeline; I cannot think how it came out. I knew you would be shocked.'

'But,' said Madeline, not liking to confess really how much shocked she felt, 'if you would explain yourself more, I should be very glad. I never heard anything about it before. Does papa really mean it?'

'He says it,' replied Alice.

'And does Lady Catharine consent?'

Digitized by Google

'Yes, I believe she does. Madeline'—and Alice's voice became lower,—'what will you think of me, when you are confirmed and I am not?'

'I shall love you always, dearly,' said Madeline, eagerly.

'But you would despise me?'

'Oh no, Alice, I should be very sorry; but I am not at all good myself.'

'Yes, you are good,' said Alice, decidedly.

'No, indeed, indeed; Alice, you mistake. It seems, sometimes, as if I could never do anything I ought.'

'Sometimes!' repeated Alice. 'It seems so always with me, and I am wretched.'

'But,' continued Madeline, 'you need not be.'

'Yes, if I never grow better, I must be.'

'But persons always grow better when they say their prayers properly,' said Madeline.

'I always do say my prayers,' replied Alice.

This acknowledgment had the effect of silencing Madeline for a short space; but, after a little consideration, she said—

'Papa tells me I must be patient with myself.'

'He does not tell me so,' said Alice. 'He declares I have no resolution.'

'But I don't think papa knows,' began Madeline—stopping, however, before the sentence was ended, from the fear lest it should be wrong to suppose her papa did not know everything; —'that is, I am sure, Alice, you can do more things than you imagine. You say you cannot draw, or play, or do a great many things which Ruth and I see you can do; and so it may be with being good.'

'That does not help me,' said Alice.

Madeline saw that she was not giving any real comfort, and wished that Alice would offer to go in-doors to Ruth.

'What makes you good, Madeline?' said Alice, abruptly.

'I am not good.'

'Yes, you are; don't say you are not. You are good; what makes you so?'

'I don't know; God makes all people good.'

'Except wicked people like me; so that is no answer. What makes you good?'

'But it is the Holy Spirit,' said Madeline, reverently, 'who gives us good thoughts; and you know, Alice, we are both alike. We have both been baptized.'

Digitized by Google

'Yes;' and Alice began to think; 'and heaps of people have been baptized too. Why are they not all good?'

'No one can tell,' replied Madeline; 'they ought to be.'

'But they are not—why are they not?'

Madeline could find no answer.

'Then some baptized people are good, and some are wicked,' said Alice. 'I am one of the wicked ones; that is why I am not to be confirmed.'

'You must have some very wrong notions,' continued Madeline, her earnestness overcoming the timidity of her character. 'We are both alike. Baptism made us alike.'

'It did not make me good,' said Alice.

Madeline's face suddenly brightened.

'It did not make me good,' she replied; 'but it was the beginning of giving me a power to be so; though, Alice, you know I did not make the use of it I might. We were naughty together as children.'

'Yet the difference now; how did it come?' exclaimed Alice, impatiently, though with an air of thought; for Madeline's reference to the faults of her childhood had given her a feeling of hope for herself. Madeline did not like to answer; she could not allow the difference upon which Alice so strongly insisted.

'Tell me, Maddy—please tell me,' said Alice. 'Oh! I would give all the world to be good.'

Madeline threw her arms round her.

'That must be good, Alice; you know wishes are given us.'

'But I don't care for wishes. What did you do? How did you begin?'

'I used to pray,' said Madeline, 'but the words were uttered with difficulty.'

Alice's face again became overcast.

'Perhaps, though, you mean what little things did I do?' continued Madeline.

'Yes; that is, I don't know exactly what I mean; but something more than saying prayers generally. One knows that to be right.'

'I cannot quite think what I did, when I began,' said Madeline. 'It was a long time back, and I am always doing wrong now. I know I used to say prayers at school in the dressing-room; that, I think, did me good—short prayers, at odd times, and standing up, because you know I should have been interrupted.'

Digitized by Google

'Did you indeed say prayers then?' inquired Alice, with a look of astonishment.

'Yes; I don't remember what it was that put it into my head —I think it was something Mrs Carter said one day, about making good resolutions. At first I went just when I thought about it, and not quite every day; but, by and by, it seemed to be natural to go, just as it is to say one's prayers at night; and I fixed an hour—five o'clock it was, when school was over, and I never missed it, if I could possibly help it.'

'But what did you say?' inquired Alice. 'Were you never interrupted? and could you think?'

'I was frightened very often,' replied Madeline; 'and now and then persons came in and sent my thoughts all away; but I hoped I should be forgiven if I tried. They were prayers out of my own head which I began with, only a few words; but I met with one or two short ones in a book, which I liked, and then I used to say them; only I altered them if I liked it—if I had anything particular to say.'

'Well!' said Alice, 'go on.'

'That was the beginning,' continued Madeline, 'and it made me happier; but I had so many faults, such a great, great many; I used to try and recollect them at night, but I had not time; the candles were taken away so soon.'

'And I remember,' said Alice, 'you were always scolded for being in bed late.'

'Yes; it used to worry me a great deal. I could not quite tell what it was right to do; at last I managed differently.'

'Differently! how?' said Alice.

'I used to divide the day,' replied Madeline. 'When I went to the dressing-room at five o'clock, I thought about what I had been doing till then, and said I was sorry, in my prayers; and afterwards, at bed-time, I had not so much to think about.'

'That was not dividing the day well,' observed Alice; 'it was too long till five o'clock.'

'No, but I could not help myself; I could not find time before, and I was obliged to make things suit as well as I could. You know I could not leave my lessons.'

'And when you had found out your faults, what did you do next?' inquired Alice.

'I knew I must try to do what was right, besides trying to get rid of the faults,' replied Madeline; 'so I made up my mind to begin pleasing Mrs Carter, if I could, all day long.'

Digitized by Google

'All the day!' repeated Alice, with a sigh of weariness at the very thought of such constant exertion.

'Yes; but it was very hard. Once I remember having such a dreadful feeling just for a moment.'

Alice fixed her eyes upon her with increasing interest.

'It was in our bedroom, I shall never forget it,' said Madeline. 'I was left the last, and I wanted to go down-stairs to practise, but the room was untidy, and I knew I ought to stay; and I began putting it in order, and just as I thought I had finished, I saw that the books on the drawers were not straight. It was a very little thing, but I went back to put them right, because Mrs Carter always liked to see them neat; then it came over me, a sort of weight, the thought that I must go on all my life, never having any rest or peace, that there would be always something to be done.'

'Yes, always something,' escaped from Alice, involuntarily.

'But Alice, I don't mean that the feeling lasted,' exclaimed Madeline; 'and I will tell you presently how I became a great deal happier.'

'But about that always trying,' said Alice; 'it must be such terrible hard work.'

'So it was at the beginning,' replied Madeline; 'but I found it would not do to leave off; I was wretched when I did, and after a very little time it became natural to be careful.'

'I don't see how that could be,' observed Alice.

'It was a habit,' said Madeline. 'At first I was obliged to think, and force myself to recollect that things were wrong; such things as dawdling, and talking idly, and speaking hastily; but when I had stopped myself tolerably often, I found that I used to check myself almost without thinking; the notion of its being wrong came in an instant, without my exactly endeavouring to make it come.'

'That is hard to understand,' said Alice.

'If you would begin you would know what I mean. Don't you know, when we were little children, and learned to use a knife and fork, how careful we were obliged to be lest we should cut our fingers? Well, now we never think about it; and so it seems, in a way, with doing right. If one begins in being particular in everything it becomes a habit.'

'And now about your being happier,' said Alice.

'Ah! that was when I returned home. Papa made me happier. He gave me notions. I think, Alice, if you could have them, you would never say it was hard to be good.'

Digitized by Google

'Well, but tell me; make haste, what were they?' said Alice.

'It was only one notion, really, but it did for everything,' replied Madeline. 'I was one day talking to papa; we were speaking about being good, and I told him how hard I found it, and that sometimes I was quite tired of trying; and he said, that if I would only believe that our Saviour was our Friend, and loved us when we tried, it would all be easy. Something came over me then—a curious feeling, but it made me very happy—as if I was not to work hard at being good like a lesson, but to please some one I loved; and it was so pleasant, it made all the world bright—I can quite remember how light-hearted I felt. The minute afterwards I was obliged to leave papa, and go in-doors, though I wished to stay very much, but I went directly without waiting an instant, and it was no hardship, because I thought that I was doing it to please a Friend, and that if I could see Him perhaps He would be smiling upon me as papa does when we have done anything he likes. Don't you see, Alice, how nice it is to think one has to please a Friend?'

'Yes, yes, indeed, if one could!' exclaimed Alice. 'Still you know, Madeline, there is the old story, one never is good—that is, I am not; and then it is no use to think in that way.'

'But a Friend,' said Madeline—and as she spoke an expression of gladness and hope lighted up her young face—'a Friend loves one always. When I have done wrong I am wretched till I think of that, and then it all comes right; and when I say I am sorry, I am really very sorry, and I wish with all my heart to do better.'

'But suppose you go wrong again in the same way?' said Alice.

'Still it is a Friend that one has to go to,' replied Madeline. 'Nothing ever seems to do away with that. It is as if one had a claim; I don't mean that exactly,' she added, slightly blushing; 'but don't you know one has a sort of claim upon one's relations? one is sure they will be more kind than other people; and we were all made, in a way, our Saviour's relations when we were baptized.'

'Yes, I never thought about that before,' said Alice; 'not in the same words. Yet I don't think I could ever get it into my head properly that our Saviour was our Friend.'

'O Alice! not when you read the gospels?'

Alice only sighed. She read the gospels as a history with

Digitized by Google

great reverence, but the personal application to herself had scarcely ever been made. Madeline had thrown a new light upon them, though quite unconsciously, for all that she said was natural to her, and a part of her every-day thoughts.

Madeline observed Alice's silence, and, fancying that she had wearied her, proposed that she should go and see about Ruth and her headache, adding that it was selfish to have kept Alice from her so long.

Alice assented; not that she was tired of the conversation, for it had given a new and happier turn to her thoughts; but there were some subjects upon which Ruth only could give her advice.

CHAPTER XLIX.

RUTH was not looking well, yet she did not appear to require sympathy. She was excited at seeing Alice, and in a great hurry that Madeline should leave them together. Alice thought this might be from pleasure in seeing her; but Ruth's first question when they were alone disappointed her. It was whether she was going to the picnic. Alice replied, 'Yes, she believed so,' and would have gone on to speak of Florence and Justine; but Ruth prevented her by saying—

'Of course, Madeline has told you about herself?'

'Told me! no—what?'

'That she is not going,' replied Ruth, and before Alice could make a remark, she added, hurriedly, 'She thinks it better not, and you know she is very good.'

'But a picnic!' exclaimed Alice. 'What possible harm can there be in a picnic? People object to balls and theatres, I know; but what can any one find fault with in a picnic?'

'Madeline only cares just now,' said Ruth; her tone of forced indifference showing that she did not intend to enter into a further explanation if it could be avoided.

'Just now—just now!' said Alice, with a perplexed air.

'Yes; cannot you understand? How dull you must be!'

'Just now!' again repeated Alice.

'Yes, just now, because of the confirmation.'

Alice became very grave, and made no remark in reply.

Digitized by Google

'What have you been doing at the school this afternoon?' inquired Ruth.

'So Madeline will not go because of the confirmation,' observed Alice, after a pause, and unheeding the question. 'That is your papa's wish, I suppose?'

'No, Madeline's alone.'

'Madeline is very much in earnest,' remarked Alice. 'One cannot help respecting her.'

'Yes, she is a great darling. She sets a very good example,' said Ruth.

'It is not merely that; other people set good examples. But I will tell you what I always feel about Madeline—that she only wishes for one thing. Other persons like their own ways—I like mine very much;—but Madeline has only one way; she only wants to do right.'

'I think that is true,' said Ruth.

'She has been telling me about herself,' continued Alice; 'how she first began to be good. It seemed all very simple and easy. When she was talking, I thought I might be good myself some day.'

'You are in such a hurry,' said Ruth. 'You despair in a moment.'

'Then I am only like your papa and Lady Catharine,' exclaimed Alice, speaking quickly, and casting her eyes upon the ground. 'They declare I am not fit to be confirmed.'

'O Alice!' Ruth could say no more; she raised herself from her reclining posture, and regarded Alice in much astonishment, not unmixed with horror.

'You may well say, "O Alice!" I knew you would be shocked. I made up my mind so before I came; but it is true. Your papa says so, and Lady Catharine; and they think that I shall never come to any good.'

Ruth could hardly keep from a smile; for she knew this must be an exaggeration. 'Now, Alice dear,' she said, in a soothing tone, 'don't fret yourself into such a fuss all in a moment; just tell me quietly what you mean. Papa does not say that you are not to be confirmed, does he?'

'All but,' replied Alice; and then, becoming calmer, she tried to collect her thoughts, and told Ruth, as well as she could remember, the substance of what had passed upon the subject both with Mr Clifford and Lady Catharine.

Ruth's judgment not being warped by personal feelings, she

Digitized by Google

saw at once that her papa did not intend to debar Alice from confirmation, if only her mind could be brought into a right state of preparation, and when Alice had finished speaking she placed her own view of the case before her. Alice was not free from perverseness. She found rather a satisfaction in believing that she had been judged hardly, and it was some time before she could be at all induced to acknowledge that Mr Clifford had not actually passed the sentence of exclusion. This fact was, however, at last admitted; and Ruth, having succeeded so far, began to urge her seriously to make up her mind to do all that was required, in order that the only real obstacle in her way might be removed. Alice did not know how or why it was; Ruth was very earnest, apparently, and spoke much more fluently than Madeline, and, moreover, she gave her direct advice, which Madeline never ventured upon to any one; but still what she said did not this morning make the same impression. She felt all the time as if Ruth was making an effort. A little weariness stole over her, and she yawned once or twice, which caused Ruth to sigh and look vexed. Alice begged her pardon, and said she really meant to attend to her notions, she knew they were extremely good; but she was tired; it had been very hot at the school, it was no wonder that Lady Catharine was forced to go home. Madeline passed the window just then, and nodded and smiled at Alice, and begged her to wait five minutes—as there was plenty of time—and then she would come and wish her good-bye. So Alice sat down, and nothing was said either by her or Ruth for some minutes. Alice broke the silence by saying—

'I suppose, Ruth, I had better tell you what I came here for. It cannot make much difference in your opinion of me.'

Ruth was somewhat startled by this preamble.

'I don't know how it is,' continued Alice; 'I think I get into a deeper mess every day. I wish Justine le Vergnier had been at Nova Scotia before she thought of coming here.'

'But what is the matter now?' asked Ruth.

'Only stupidity; I never meant to do any harm. But Mrs De Lacy called yesterday, as you know, and she mentioned to Lady Catharine that Florence had a French friend with her. This morning Lady Catharine asked me if it could be Justine; and then I found out that Mrs Carter had written about her, and said something against Florence too.'

Digitized by Google

'But what answer did you make to the question?' inquired Ruth.

'I was silent, and she took it for granted that it was not the same person.'

Ruth looked pained and thoughtful.

'It was deceiving, I know,' said Alice; 'but what could I do? However, I have been miserable enough since in all conscience, and I could not be happy without confessing to you.'

Ruth did not make any comment immediately, but began to wind a skein of silk which she had taken from her work-box.

'It is a most provoking business,' observed Alice.

'Yes, a sad one,' was Ruth's grave reply.

'You think I have done wrong,' said Alice; 'and so I have, I know; but I really am as vexed about it as you can be. There is one comfort, however: we need not have anything more to do with Florence and her plans. This notion of Madeline's will help us out of our difficulty; for we may all stay away from the picnic together.'

Just then Ruth's silk became so entangled that she seemed unable to give her attention to what Alice was saying.

'I am sure I don't want to go to the picnic,' continued Alice; 'and, besides, it may be better not. It would certainly turn my head, if it would Madeline's; and if I am to try to be good, as you say, I had better keep out of temptation; and that will be a good excuse for us all.'

Ruth laid down her silk-winder, and going to her desk took from it Justine's note, which she put into Alice's hand. Alice read it carefully, and when she had finished, remarked—

'That makes some difference. Justine evidently wishes to see you.'

'Yes, to tell me her history and ask my advice.'

'Then let me stay at home, and you go,' said Alice.

'No, no—impossible. What would papa and mamma think of me? The only excuse for my doing differently from Madeline is because of you.'

'I don't know that Justine is worth taking so much trouble about,' said Alice.

'But it is not Justine only, there is Florence to be thought of. We really must try and persuade her to be open with her aunt. It will never do to let her go on as she is doing now; and it would be dreadful for Justine to be governess to Agnes if she is not a fit person. You see, if Florence will not listen to letters, we must manage to see her.'

Digitized by Google

'I wish Madeline did not think it right to remain at home,' observed Alice.

'But you must remember that she knows nothing of our reasons. Her example cannot be binding upon us. I am glad she stays away. We must have let her into the secret if she had gone, and though I know she would have attended to my wishes and been silent, it is just as well that she should be kept out of the affair.'

Alice again said she wished they could let the matter rest; she had had quite enough of it, and the further they went on the more difficult it seemed to be to know what to do. To all which Ruth assented in words, whilst still persisting in taking her own view of duty. Not that it was easy to settle what was to be done; Lady Catharine's suspicions made it certainly dangerous for Justine to meet her. Alice said that Lady Catharine had such a sharp eye, she would be sure to notice everything that went on, and if they were the least off their guard they might do mischief; and first one plan was proposed and then another; Ruth seeing all the difficulties, and again and again repeating that it was very annoying, and quite a weight upon her mind to be obliged to manage such a business, and Alice still sighing over her past deception and wishing to be free, yet yielding to Ruth's arguments because she was unable to combat them, and always believed that what Ruth said was right—must be so.

They parted at last dissatisfied and unsettled. Ruth was to think and decide, and let Alice know her determination the next day. True to her principles of doing good, Ruth's farewell to Alice was accompanied by an entreaty that she would think of what had been said about the confirmation.

CHAPTER L.

RUTH'S influence was in general all-powerful with Alice: Madeline was scarcely thought of. Now the two sisters differed, and, strange though it may appear, Madeline's opinion had the greatest weight. There is a power in simple devotedness to the service of God which always makes itself felt. It outbalances all reasoning—all which is termed philosophy. A few words from a thoroughly sincere, religious person will have

Digitized by Google

more effect in the end than torrents of eloquence from one who is, even in a slight degree, double-minded. 'If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.' Who does not appreciate the charm of a single-minded character? Madeline Clifford was inferior to her sister in many ways. She was not so clever; she had not the same powers of conversation; she was not so soft and engaging in manner. Ordinary acquaintances called her less interesting; but the feeling which she inspired was that of confidence and rest. She had no selfish motives: even if she decided a case according to what would appear her own advantage, no one could distrust her. It was impossible not to see that she had but one aim—the right. To Alice such a character was in a degree incomprehensible, and hitherto she had looked upon it as simply childlike; but the last conversation had altered her views. One who could steadily begin a course of religion, and carry it on amidst the temptations and difficulties of a school-life, and still continue it, month after month and year after year, could be no child; at least in the sense in which Alice used the word. There was a sense indeed in which Madeline was a child; in which it was probable, and much to be hoped, that she would continue a child even to her old age; for hers was the disposition of heart to which we may believe our Lord alluded when He said, 'Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.'

Alice went back to dine at the Manor with a more hearty resolution to do her duty than she had entertained for many days. She even began to consider in detail what Madeline had said, and think whether it might not be possible to adopt her plan of setting aside some time in the middle of the day for private prayer. That seemed a practical duty, which she could begin at once. Perhaps, if she could, it might help her forwards; at any rate it was a beginning, and perhaps also—and Alice's heart bounded with a sudden and unusual feeling of happiness when the thought crossed her—perhaps, as Madeline had said, God would be pleased with her if she were to do so. Pleased with her! Poor Alice could scarcely realise the idea of a fellow-creature being pleased with her, much less the Almighty and All Holy One. Yet the feeling came, though but for a moment. It passed across the wearying prospect of her daily duties as the sunlight flashes upon a gloomy landscape, and, when it was gone, the remembrance of the brightness which it had caused still lingered in

Digitized by Google

her mind. It was the first faint glimpse of that unearthly, unwearied spirit of love, which converts the heaviest load of duty into a burden scarcely to be felt, and the saddest trials of this mortal pilgrimage into the 'light affliction that endureth but for a moment.' If left to herself, Alice would undoubtedly have followed Madeline's example. The hope which Ruth held out of Mr Clifford's consenting to her confirmation, was a great stimulus to exertion; but if she had this in view, she could not shut her eyes to the fact that Madeline's decision regarding the picnic would be the safe one for herself. It did not require much self-denial to acknowledge and act upon this conclusion. Alice was out of spirits, and tired of having mysteries with Florence and Justine, and while Madeline's conversation was fresh in her mind, she cared little for their society. But the next day brought a different determination; for the next day brought Ruth to the Manor, more bent than ever upon going, more plausible in her reasons for believing it her own duty, and more eager to convince Alice that it would be impossible for her to go alone, because it would look so strange.

All difficulties as to Lady Catharine were to be obviated by giving Florence and Justine warning beforehand; Justine would then stay away from the picnic, and they might hear her history from Florence, and use their utmost efforts to put things straight. Alice's volatile temper was at length worked upon to believe this to be, as Ruth said, acting for the best; doing what would be kind to Justine and useful to Florence. But Ruth was rather startled at perceiving how Alice's whole train of thought altered when the decision was finally made. Having the picnic in her mind, she soon threw aside the confirmation. Ruth mentioned it, and renewed her advice, and especially warned her about being respectful and attentive to Lady Catharine; that was a point, she said, upon which her papa would certainly be particular.

But Alice's gay 'Oh, yes; trust me; I mean to be a piece of perfection,' was very different from her thoughtfulness the day before.

'What a pity it is Alice is so changeable!' was Ruth's reflection as she left the Manor.

That of Alice, as she went down-stairs to luncheon, was, 'Well, I think I am glad after all that we are going. I daresay we shall enjoy ourselves, but it will not be worth while to trouble myself with new plans till afterwards.'

Digitized by Google

In one respect peculiarly Lady Catharine and Alice were entirely unlike. Lady Catharine was never changeable. What she was one day that she was on the next, unless outward circumstances had occurred to cause a reasonable alteration. She had been grave and unhappy about Alice on the previous day; she was so still. And when Lady Catharine was unhappy she was generally stern.

This is not an uncommon case, and it is one which requires a good deal of consideration in persons who are living together. It is the same when people are ill; some are melancholy, some are cross, some are quiet and moody; and it is very difficult to make allowance for them, as we should wish to have allowance made for ourselves. As for Lady Catharine, Alice thought but little about her; though she looked really very unwell. Her close widow's cap always gave a certain air of suffering to her countenance, but now she had lost her colour and scarcely ate anything. It did just cross Alice's mind that perhaps Lady Catharine was anxious about her, but the supposition seemed rather absurd. Alice was not then anxious about herself, and why should Lady Catharine be?

Lady Catharine finished her scanty meal, and waited patiently whilst Alice regaled herself with whatever she fancied. Alice was apparently hungry, or at any rate she was not inclined to be self-denying, and some little time passed in silence, during which Lady Catharine sat with her hands folded, seemingly too much occupied with her own thoughts to be willing to interrupt her companion. Yet her eyes were raised from time to time, and once they met Alice's, and then the expression was so earnest and inquiring, that Alice felt uncomfortable, and finished her piece of cake as quickly as she could, in the hope of escaping from the scrutinising gaze, which she felt even when she did not see it. But it was in vain to hope to escape from Lady Catharine whenever anything was to be said; and when Alice poured out the concluding glass of water, and then looked up with the unspoken request in her eye, 'May I go?' Lady Catharine answered it by saying, 'Alice, I should like to have a few minutes' conversation with you.'

Alice's heart sank; she made no answer, but leaned back in her chair and twisted her chain.

'After what passed yesterday,' continued Lady Catharine, 'it will not surprise you to be told that the subject upon which I wish to speak is your confirmation.'

Digitized by Google

Alice only bent her eyes more steadfastly upon the floor.

'You may give up the idea at once,' pursued Lady Catharine; 'but I cannot. It is a very anxious time for me, Alice, and a most important one for you. No one can tell the consequences of delay. Another year, and you may not be living; I may not be living. I have spoken again to Mr Clifford. He feels with me. He is most unwilling to interpose any obstacle. He would rejoice to know that you were prepared. Mrs Clifford also is interested about you; I have seen them both this morning. All your friends care for you, Alice, but you will not care for yourself.'

The day before, Alice might have been touched by this appeal; now she wished herself out of the room.

'It is strange,' continued Lady Catharine, her tone growing more severe as she proceeded, 'that the example of others should have so little influence with you. Mrs Clifford alluded to-day to her own children. Ruth, we know, is a very charming girl; steady, high principled, with sense and resolution far beyond her years; but even Madeline, whom we always considered childish and thoughtless, has in the present instance given signs of deep seriousness. Mrs Clifford tells me that it is her wish to refrain from joining the picnic to St Cuthbert's next week, because she fears it may disturb and occupy her mind more than is desirable at such a time. Alice! what pleasure it would have given me to know that you had any such care for your best interests.'

An excuse rose to Alice's lips. She knew that even that very morning her wish had been to follow Madeline's example.

'The world, I see,' continued Lady Catharine, regarding her attentively, 'has too much power over you, to enable you to consent to any such sacrifice. You will, perhaps, say that Ruth does not see the necessity of it, and therefore why should you? But Ruth and yourself cannot be put upon a par. No doubt there are very good reasons for her accepting the invitation; in fact, it may not be proper that all the party should refuse. I am not saying that I consider it necessary for any of you to do so; I only mention the case as an instance of Madeline's earnestness. If you were in earnest, Alice, there would be many ways of showing it even if you did go with Ruth.'

'I do not care about the picnic,' said Alice, in a proud tone. 'Ruth knows that I do not. I am perfectly willing to stay at home.'

Digitized by Google

'Alice,' replied Lady Catharine, 'you are taking up this matter perversely. Going to the picnic, or not going, will not render you fit or unfit for confirmation. It is the principle upon which you act that is really of importance. You may, like Ruth, choose from good and right motives to go; or you may, like Madeline, choose from good and right motives to stay at home; in either case I should be satisfied. In your present mood, on the contrary, I must be dissatisfied. If you were to shut yourself up in your room for the next week, it would not make a difference; it is the heart, Alice, which is at fault.' Alice was still piqued by a sense of injustice at Lady Catharine's words; she forgot that Lady Catharine could not know what had passed in her thoughts.

'When the idea of delaying your confirmation was first proposed,' continued Lady Catharine, 'I hoped that the very idea would so have distressed you as to arouse a spirit of energy. But I am disappointed, grievously disappointed; you appear utterly indifferent. God grant you may not really be so.'

A tear glistened in Alice's eye, but she strove to appear indifferent. Lady Catharine gazed upon her sadly, and a sigh rose from the very depths of her heart. 'Alice,' she said, more solemnly, 'indecision cannot continue. If your conduct does not determine the question one way it will the other; and remember, that in these smaller trials of life, we are rehearsing the great trials of our whole existence on earth. Every time that we are called upon to make choice between good and evil, we are throwing a weight into the balance which shall decide our happiness for eternity.'

Then the tear which had gathered in Alice's eye rolled slowly down her cheek; but she turned away and Lady Catharine did not perceive it.

When Alice, after this conversation, went to her room, a note from Ruth was lying on her table. It was to this effect, that she had found on her return home that Mrs De Lacy had written to Mrs Clifford, saying that the arrangements for the picnic were quite completed, and she hoped nothing would happen to interfere with the pleasure of the party. They were to meet at Sheldon, and from thence proceed to St Cuthbert's—a very large party, much larger than was at first proposed. Lady Catharine was to bring the Laneton party to Sheldon, and afterwards they might settle as to the young people going together, which would of course be more agreeable to them.

Digitized by Google

They were to dine under the trees in one of the courtyards of the castle, if the weather should be fine; but as there was an empty room at the porter's lodge, it would not much interfere with their comfort even if there should be a shower of rain. Mrs De Lacy hinted the possibility of returning to Sheldon, and finishing the evening there; upon which Ruth's observation was, 'I think this may suit us. In a line to me, Florence says she has settled to go alone; why, I do not know.' Alice read the note twice, with much interest. It was still open before her when she sat down, trying to recall the feelings which Lady Catharine's words had awakened. The choice between good and evil at that moment lay before her. The party of pleasure was not the unimportant matter which Lady Catharine imagined. Alice knew—she did not even attempt to shut her eyes to the knowledge—that it would be a temptation, and that if she could avoid it, a victory over herself would be obtained, and the first step on the right road taken.

When Alice entered her own chamber, the resolution was all but made. She read Ruth's note and wavered? Indecision! still indecision! Alice was miserable again. But Ruth was going herself—Ruth wished her to go—Ruth was so good she could not lead any one wrong.

And was Ruth, then, become Alice's tempter? She whose one sole object was to do good. Was it possible?

CHAPTER LI.

IT was a glorious day for the picnic at St Cuthbert's, bright, and almost cloudless, with a soft, cooling breeze, and no prospect of a change of weather. Madeline rose early, and a feeling of regret stole over her as she threw open the lattice and fastened it back. The fresh air blew deliciously into the room, bearing the scent of the roses, and jasmine, and clematis, which covered the walls of the house. She sat down by the open window, to gather a rosebud which was just lifting itself to a level with her hand, and remained thinking for many minutes Ruth came to her, and kneeling down by her side, said—

'Maddy, I wish you were going.'

Madeline was startled by the expression of her own wishes;

Digitized by Google

it recalled her to herself. 'No,' she said; 'don't wish it. I am much better away.'

'But it would add very much to my pleasure if you were going,' observed Ruth. 'I never like things when you are away, there seems no one to enjoy them with me. Sisters are different from everything else.'

'Yes, sisters are different,' said Madeline, gently putting back Ruth's hair, and gazing upon her with a look of affection that could not be spoken. 'A sister is one's self; something so precious; it is a weight upon my mind very often that I cannot say it out more. Ruth! I do love you so very dearly.' Madeline's lips quivered, and when Ruth kissed her, she smiled and said, 'she felt so silly, almost as if she could cry.'

'About the picnic, or because you are fond of me?' inquired Ruth, in a tone which, whatever the words might have appeared, showed no lightness of feeling.

'Because I am fond of you, I think. I don't know why it is, but beautiful days always make me think more of you, Ruth. We have spent a great many together, very happy ones.'

'And it seems hard that we cannot spend this one,' observed Ruth.

'Yes, it did seem hard just for a moment; but the worst is gone now. One reason why I am sorry is because we have never had any pleasure apart before.'

'No, never since we were children,' replied Ruth.

'And it would not have signified in the same way then,' continued Madeline. 'We did not know then why we cared for each other; but it grows upon one now,—the love, the certainty that we are all in all to each other, and nothing can come between us. Sometimes in the bright summer days, when you are with me, it comes over me like a new feeling.'

Ruth was resting her head upon Madeline's shoulder, and her arm was clasped around her waist. The strong resemblance of childhood was still remarkable between them. Their fair hair mingled in curls which could not be distinguished in colour, and the eyes of each bore the same bright hue. Madeline's smile was subdued now, and the expression of her mouth might have been taken for that of Ruth; and as Ruth raised her eyes to her sister, half in thankfulness for her love, and half in eagerness to show how fully it was returned, the warmth and simplicity of her expression might have been Madeline's in her happiest mood. We are all strangely formed in one mould, yet

Digitized by Google

the infinite difference that lies beneath the outward resemblance! God only can understand it!

'Yes, you will love me always,' was Ruth's reply, spoken in a low earnest voice; 'but Madeline,' she added, 'I wish we could always think alike.'

'I do not see where we differ to-day,' replied Madeline. 'I should do like you if I were strong-minded.'

'Strong-minded,' repeated Ruth, musingly.

'Yes, that is the one thing especially in which I feel you are my superior.'

Ruth said hurriedly, 'Madeline, I am not your superior.'

Madeline only smiled, and answered, 'That it was not the time to argue the question. Dress first, Ruth, dear,' she said, playfully, 'and we will talk about it afterwards.'

Yet Ruth still lingered at the window, looking intently upon the view of the gardens and the village, and the distant sea. 'Madeline, I am not your superior,' she said again, after a few seconds, 'and it is not because I am good that I am going to the picnic.'

Madeline went up to her, and kissing her, answered, 'You shall be as wicked as you like if you will only dress. We are both dreadfully late.'

'But,' said Ruth, taking no notice of the warning, 'I wish you would understand me; and I wish I could understand you exactly; what the real reason is, I mean, for your not going.'

Madeline laughed. 'Why, Ruth,' she said, 'you do not suspect me of two reasons, do you?'

'No, not two; but I do not think you have one clear one.'

'I will tell you what my reason is,' said Madeline. 'Do you remember last year when we were staying with grandmamma and aunt Mordaunt, our drinking tea at old Mr Falconer's, and some of the people playing whist?'

'Yes, certainly.'

'Then you must remember too that lady who would be particular about following rules, and kept on saying, "When in doubt win the trick." I asked papa afterwards what it meant, and he said it was a lesson for life as well as for cards; that when we were in doubt as to what was right, it was better to decide upon that which would be safer at the present moment. So you see that is what I am doing. It might do me harm to go to the picnic; therefore, as there is a doubt, it seems better to stay at home and win the trick.'

Digitized by Google

Ruth was ready with an objection that this would not hold good, because there must be a doubt about all society, whether it was desirable.

But Madeline's quick reply was drawn from a remark of her papa's, 'that of course, as a general rule, people were not made to live like hermits, and therefore they must meet in society, and it would be wrong to stay away. But each one must decide for himself according to his own conscience, as to what society, and how much was good. The picnic, she thought, would not be good for her at that particular time, which was the reason she refrained from it.

Lady Catharine's carriage turned into the Parsonage lane punctually as the clock struck nine. Madeline was the first to hear the rumble of the wheels, and to hasten Ruth, that Lady Catharine might not be kept an instant waiting. 'Here are your gloves and your parasol, Ruth; and don't forget your shawl. It will be cold, perhaps, coming home; and your cloak, too, I think you had better have. Stay, the string is off, just take mine instead. How glad I am it is a nice day!' There was no sadness in Madeline's face then; her step was as light and free, and her voice as cheerful, as if she had been anticipating the greatest amusement, instead of a long and almost solitary day.

The head of the barouche was drawn over, though it was a very warm morning, and no one saw at first that the carriage only contained one person.

'Two, there must be, certainly,' said Madeline, in precisely that tone which expresses decided doubt. 'Ruth, just come here.' Ruth went to her.

'No, Madeline; there is only one. Alice it is. Lady Catharine is not there. How very strange!'

'She must be ready,' said Madeline, laughing. 'I will venture to say that Lady Catharine was never known to be late from the time she could walk to the present hour.'

'The house must be burned down, or that staid Marsham must be ill,' continued Ruth, 'or Lady Catharine must have slept ten minutes beyond her time; no common cause could induce her to break an engagement.'

Both ran to the door to receive Alice, and inquire what was the matter.

Alice looked pleased rather than not, as she said that it was nothing very particular, only one of the housemaids had been

Digitized by Google

taken ill, and Lady Catharine did not like to leave home, so she had sent her alone and begged that Mrs Clifford would take charge of her. 'She was very good-natured about it, I must say,' continued Alice, 'I never saw her so fussed before; first thinking of one thing, then another. Once she said we should go and return quite early; but I think I must have looked disappointed, for she changed her mind directly, and said, "No, that would not do;" and then she thought that perhaps Maria would be better before we set off; but at last she settled that I should go without her, though I am sure she did not half fancy it.'

'And did you not offer to stay at home?' inquired Madeline, in a tone of some surprise.

'No, it never entered my head. Would it have been right, do you think?'

'It would have helped Lady Catharine out of a difficulty,' replied Madeline.

'Well, perhaps it might, but I never once thought of it; and besides, it would not have done, would it, Ruth?' she added, with a meaning glance, which made Ruth turn away in displeasure. 'I must say one thing to you,' continued Alice, drawing Ruth aside, 'I had a long sermon about young ladies' friendships, and specially about Florence Trevelyan. I really believe that if she thought I cared an iota for Florence, beyond liking to see her because we were at school together, she would have kept me from the picnic. She seems to have some especial prejudice against her, and says she cannot help being glad that the whole party are going to France. We are safe, however, in one way; she has not a notion that Justine is really Justine, for she said again that of course I should have known if she had been my old acquaintance.'

'I wonder after all this that you were allowed to come with us,' said Ruth, whose countenance had become more and more overcast as Alice went on.

'The long engagement, and your mamma's going with us were the great things in my favour,' replied Alice. 'Lady Catharine has such trust in your mamma.'

'I begin to be half sorry we have troubled ourselves at all about Justine or Florence either,' said Ruth. 'It might have been better to let them take their own way.'

Alice only laughed, and declared, 'She did not care for anything now. She intended to enjoy herself thoroughly, and put care aside.'

Digitized by Google

'Care and the confirmation,' thought Ruth; for the quiet way in which Alice repeated what Lady Catharine had said, and the indifference with which she spoke of her own particular deception, were convincing proofs that her mind was not in a fit state for a religious ordinance.

Madeline gazed after the carriage as it drove away with a passing wish to be in it; but it was so soon checked that when her father stopped her as she was going up-stairs, and asked if she repented her choice, she was able to answer, heartily and sincerely, 'No, indeed; but I hope they will have a happy day.'

CHAPTER LII.

FLORENCE TREVELYAN met Ruth with the information — accompanied by a smile which she could not altogether restrain—that Justine had a bad headache and was to keep her room for the day. When she found, however, that Lady Catharine was remaining at the Manor, her tone of amusement changed into that of annoyance.

'How extremely provoking!' she exclaimed, 'to have given up our pleasure for nothing; and besides, I rather looked forward to seeing Juno scrambling over the broken walls.'

A look of great disgust crossed Ruth's face.

'It is safer in one way, though,' said Alice, who had joined them, and who perceived that Ruth was not inclined to reply. 'Mrs Clifford might have made remarks as well as Lady Catharine.'

'We were not much afraid of that as long as she has no suspicions,' replied Florence; 'for Mrs Clifford never saw Justine, and my aunt, who has a knack of miscalling foreign names, always addresses her as Mademoiselle Veray, and one name being as good as another, we have never taken the trouble to enlighten her.'

'Florence, Florence!' exclaimed Ruth, 'this will never do. You really grow worse and worse.'

'Ah, well! we will have a little talk together by and by. Don't trouble yourself, Ruth; you will be quite satisfied;' and Florence moved away to speak to some other friends.

Ruth watched her as she went from one to the other, smiling

Digitized by Google

and talking, and bending gracefully, and with perfect self-possession, whilst her aunt introduced her to several persons whom she had not known before; and could scarcely believe it possible that this was the same dull, silly girl to whom she had felt herself so superior at school, and who even now seemed to look to her for advice. Nothing is so flattering to our self-conceit as deference shown by those who either in rank, age, or position are naturally above us; and Ruth felt raised in her own opinion when she saw that she was respected by one who apparently knew so much more of the world than she did. Florence herself appeared in a new light; and the ease of manner which she showed struck Ruth as something wonderful and enviable. The party was now complete, and Mrs De Lacy eager to set off. Mrs Clifford, Ruth, and Alice were called away to settle in what carriage and with what friends they would best like to proceed to St Cuthbert's. Florence tried very hard to manage for Ruth and Alice to go alone with her in a little pony-chaise of Mrs De Lacy's; but Mrs Clifford was anxious about Alice, as Lady Catharine was not there to give her consent, and very unwillingly was obliged to insist upon her remaining with her. Alice was extremely disappointed; but consoled herself by the thought that it would be almost as pleasant to have Ruth and Mrs Clifford to herself as to be with Florence. Here, again, however, she found an obstacle to her wishes. Mrs Clifford did not object to Ruth's going with Florence, provided there was a servant behind; and when the choice was given to Ruth between the barouche and the pony-chaise, true to her principle of doing good, she decided that it would be better to remain with Florence, and have an opportunity of conversing with her, than to shut herself up with Alice, whom she might see every day. When the whole party at length drove off, poor Alice was almost the only person dissatisfied with the arrangement made for her.

St Cuthbert's Castle stood near the sea shore, upon a flat space of raised ground, the sides of which were covered with trees and underwood; the ruins spread over a considerable extent, and the outer walls could be traced without difficulty; but the former habitable part of the building was now converted into a homely dwelling, inhabited by the family of a poor man, to whose charge the castle was committed, and only one room remained, with its low rafters, and deep windows encircled by ivy, and half hidden by shrubs and elder bushes,

Digitized by Google

to show the style of the apartments in which our ancestors once lived.

A deep ravine lay between the castle and the opposite hill, on the summit of which was placed a watch-tower, commanding an extensive view over the sea, and reaching to a faint line of the coast many miles distant. It was more as a picturesque ruin, and beautiful in its situation, that St Cuthbert's was celebrated than from possessing any remarkable historical associations. The original building, like that of many other castles of the kind, was of Saxon date; but tradition stated that the Britons had fortified the same spot even before them.

A picnic, however, does not afford the very best opportunity for carrying on study of any kind. Mrs De Lacy's party in general cared little for Britons or Saxons. The greater part sought for amusement in clambering over dangerous places; a few had set their hearts upon obtaining a good position for a sketch; and of the remainder some wandered about in alarm, watching the young people, who seemed upon the point of breaking their necks as they scrambled over the walls, and some sat down upon the grass and talked over old times with friends whom they had not lately met, whilst one or two, amongst whom Mrs De Lacy was conspicuous, hurried from spot to spot, to seek the best situation for preparing the dinner, a main object of all English meetings, whether of business or of pleasure.

Mrs Clifford was unwilling to be any restraint upon Alice, and as soon as they arrived at the castle proposed that she should wait for Ruth and Florence, who were some little way behind them, and then join them and go over the ruins together. Alice assented, though without appearing particularly to care what she did. She was, in fact, annoyed at having been left by Ruth; and not all Mrs Clifford's endeavours to amuse her on the road had sufficed to restore her to good humour. Ruth and Florence drove up in high spirits, all serious conversation having been diverted by the necessity of attending to a frisky pony. Ruth had made her first essay in driving, and was very desirous of exhibiting her skill as they entered the courtyard. She called to Alice to observe how well she could manage, but Alice only looked up and said—

'Yes,' and made no further remark.

'Are you ready, my dear,' said Mrs Clifford, as Alice lingered, examining the gateway, before entering the castle. 'We are the last of all.'

Digitized by Google

Alice hurried on, and Mrs Clifford, reading what was passing in her mind, followed, willing, if possible, to put her in good spirits again.

'We must not keep quite to ourselves,' she said, 'or we shall miss hearing all there is to be told. The old guide will never forgive us if we make him repeat his story twice.'

'Oh! but, mamma,' exclaimed Ruth, 'let us get rid of the old guide. I have brought the book that papa gave me the other day, telling all about the castle. It will be much better to go over it by ourselves, and find out all the parts. Come, Florence.'

Agnes De Lacy at that moment ran up to them. She had been sent by her mamma to look for them. Mrs De Lacy wanted Florence to give her opinion about the proper place for the dinner. Florence hurried away, but returned almost immediately, begging Ruth to accompany her. This marked preference irritated Alice still more; it seemed as if Ruth had quite taken her place; but Mrs Clifford objected to Ruth's going alone, and they went on together; Florence and Ruth still in front. Mrs De Lacy had fixed upon a shady spot under some trees, which grew in what had once been the tilt-yard of the castle. It was a large free space, sheltered and private, and here the servants were busy placing as many tables and chairs as could be provided from the porter's lodge, whilst hampers and baskets, veal pies and hams, tarts and sandwiches, cakes, biscuits, soda water and champagne bottles, reposed side by side upon the grass. Mrs De Lacy was one of those persons who, when roused from indolence, can only be happy in extreme activity. She detained Florence a long time consulting her upon points which would have been much better settled by the servants; and Florence, not liking to be alone in her annoyance, kept Ruth by her side, whilst Mrs Clifford and Alice sat down upon a bench, expecting every minute to be at liberty. Several parties strayed into the tilt-yard; but finding how it was to be occupied, went away, and as their voices were heard in merriment, sometimes quite near and sometimes in the distance, whilst they explored the castle, Alice grew more and more provoked at being obliged to waste so much time. Mrs Clifford was just thinking of calling Ruth and going over the ruins with them alone, when a gentleman and two ladies appeared in the court, and instead of retiring, made their way to Mrs De Lacy. The gentleman apologised for

Digitized by Google

intruding, but begged to leave his niece under her care, whilst he went with his daughter to see the castle. The young lady was then taken to a seat near that occupied by Mrs Clifford and Alice, and her uncle and cousin went away. She was a pleasing-looking girl, apparently much out of health. Alice was struck by her features; they recalled a face she had seen before, and she tried to remember whose it was. She went up to Ruth, who had wandered away with Florence to a little distance.

'Do look, Ruth,' she said, 'who can that be? Just watch her; she is so precisely like some one I know.'

Ruth had not noticed her particularly, but now she drew nearer.

'Mary Vernon!' she said; 'how very odd!—exactly her face it is; only the hair is lighter. Who is she, Florence?'

'I don't know,' said Florence, quickly; 'my aunt has asked a great many whom I have never seen. I hope she has nothing to do with Mary Vernon.'

'Don't say that, Florence,' exclaimed Ruth, eagerly. 'Mary Vernon is delightful; but you never would acknowledge it.'

'I don't care for her,' said Florence, 'one way or the other; but I am glad she is in Ireland, and I do not wish her or any of her friends to trouble themselves with our concerns just now.'

'Why? what? how could they trouble themselves?' inquired Ruth.

'Oh! I don't know. I think they are interfering people,' replied Florence, with an air of indifference; but she immediately turned the conversation.

Ruth regarded the young lady more attentively, and again declared the likeness to Mary Vernon so striking, that she could not rest without knowing who she was. Florence, however, called her attention to another subject immediately, and although Ruth made several attempts to go, she was detained for some little time. Mrs De Lacy, in the meantime, had introduced the stranger to Mrs Clifford as a Miss Merton, a niece of Colonel Merton, the gentleman who had just left them, and who had a house in the neighbourhood of Sheldon. After this introduction, conversation went on easily; and when Alice, having finished her few words with Ruth, went back to the bench, she found Mrs Clifford and their new acquaintance on very agreeable terms. Alice listened to what was said with

Digitized by Google

much interest, endeavouring to find a clue to the striking likeness; and one subject leading to another, it was not long before the desired point was reached. London was spoken of; London air; residences in London; schools amongst them; then Mrs Carter's name was mentioned, and the mystery was immediately solved, by Miss Merton's exclamation: 'Oh! were you at Mrs Carter's? I had a first cousin there two or three years ago. Mary Vernon—did you know her?' Alice laughed at this easy explanation of the circumstance which had perplexed her, and giving but a hasty answer to the question, hastened away to tell Ruth of the discovery. Florence was just then proposing to Ruth that they should carry off Alice on a scrambling expedition to the top of the gateway, and leave Mrs De Lacy and Mrs Clifford to take care of the stranger, who seemed, she said, to have neither strength nor spirits for such an undertaking.

'Never mind Mary Vernon and Miss Merton, Alice,' she exclaimed, her countenance showing anything but satisfaction at the information which Alice gave with so much pleasure. 'They are very good people, I daresay; but Mary Vernon is in Ireland, and Miss Merton is fixed to that bench for the rest of the day. They are neither of them any good on a picnic party. I can't see indeed why invalids should come to such things.'

'Come, Ruth, you must be introduced to her,' said Alice in her turn, unheeding Florence's observation.

'Yes, of course, I will come directly. I think I should like to stay and talk to her. Can't we wait, Florence, till after dinner, for the gateway?'

'No, no, indeed, we must not; we shall have the watch-tower for after dinner; and your sketch, Ruth, which you told me you had set your heart upon.'

'Yes, I forgot, I was to take it for Madeline; but still I must just ask about Mary. Do wait for me—only five minutes.'

'No, really, Ruth, we must not wait; if we want to see the gateway, we must go at once. I daresay Miss Merton is quite happy without knowing you.'

'No, I assure you she is not,' observed Alice; 'I heard her mention Ruth's name just as I came away. Of course, Mary Vernon has talked to her about Ruth.'

Florence looked more discomposed than Alice had often before seen her: but finding that Ruth was bent upon the

Digitized by Google

introduction, she followed close behind, begging her not to delay. Ruth had many questions to ask and much to hear, being delighted to meet with some one who had lately seen Mary Vernon, and could tell every particular about her; but Florence seemed determined to give her no rest. Miss Merton happening to mention that she hoped to remain in the neighbourhood some time, Florence instantly made this a pretext for hurrying Ruth away, observing that, 'as there would be many future opportunities, no doubt, for conversation, but none, probably, for seeing St Cuthbert's, it would be better to defer what was to be said for the present.'

Alice had by this time partially recovered her good humour; not, however, from any effort of principle, but merely because her attention was drawn off from herself. When Florence begged her to accompany them, she made no objection, though a little before she had formed the perverse resolution of leaving Ruth and Florence to themselves for the rest of the day. Mrs Clifford could not allow Miss Merton to remain alone, as Mrs De Lacy was gone from the tilt-yard; and after promising to return in time for dinner, and to keep to the regular steps which led to the top of the gateway, Florence, Ruth, and Alice went away together, evidently much to the satisfaction of the former. Alice could not help saying to Ruth as they lingered in a narrow path a little behind Florence—

'I thought, Ruth, you had given me up, and taken to a new friend.'

Ruth quite laughed at the idea.

'How foolish, Alice!' she replied; 'you forget the reason of my coming here.'

'To see Florence, and talk to her gravely. But have you done it?'

'Not yet; there has not been time enough.'

'When you were driving together there was, surely; and just now, when you were walking up and down the court, you were talking very fast.'

'There are proper seasons,' replied Ruth; 'one cannot introduce subjects abruptly; but I mean to say something by and by. All this is leading to it; we are becoming better acquainted, and Florence will be more inclined to listen to me when she understands me thoroughly. I assure you it is not time thrown away if one has any hope of influencing her rightly.

'Well, you know best,' was Alice's reply; 'but I am glad to

Digitized by Google

have a reason for things. And you really do not like Florence better than me?'

'Oh no! impossible!' exclaimed Ruth, in a tone so loud that it made Florence turn round and inquire what was impossible? But Ruth evaded the answer, and changed the conversation, and it was apparently forgotten, though Alice became more cheerful after it.

CHAPTER LIII.

A GREAT bell rang—the bell at the gateway: it was the signal for dinner. Parties came pouring into the tilt-yard from every quarter. Florence, Ruth, and Alice made their appearance when the tables were half filled. Mrs Clifford went to meet them.

'You are late, my dears, but I have kept places for you. Colonel Merton was kind enough to give an order to his servant.'

Florence slightly coloured, and pointing to an empty place at her aunt's table, said they could go there.

'Thank you; but we need not crowd Mrs De Lacy. Come, Alice, my love,' and Mrs Clifford, feeling herself especially bound to take charge of Alice, walked forward with her.

The countenance of Florence betrayed extreme annoyance; but her face was averted from Ruth, and they both hurried on.

'Now, then,' said Colonel Merton, as they came up, 'there are two seats on each side reserved especially.'

Florence still went on, at the risk of crowding Mrs Clifford.

'Mrs Clifford, this place is for you,' said Colonel Merton. He pointed to the seat next to himself.

Miss Merton took her position next to Alice, by her side. Florence could not prevent it; she went round to a chair opposite, and sank into it with a face gloomy as a thunder-cloud.

'And that young lady is the daughter of Mr Trevelyan, of Cromer Court, is she?' inquired Miss Merton of Alice, as she looked at Florence after a silence of some length.

'Yes; there are two sisters and several brothers. You must have heard Mary Vernon speak of her.'

'Was she at Mrs Carter's? I forgot Mary's mentioning

Digitized by Google

that. What I have known about her has been since they were at school.'

'Indeed!' repeated Alice. 'I fancied you were strangers.'

'So we are personally; but there was an unhappy affair about a French governess in which she was mixed up, and then I used to hear her name frequently. Mary and she did not take the same view of the case. It was a sad business altogether.'

Alice's curiosity was in a moment completely aroused. Just then Mrs Clifford spoke to Alice upon some indifferent subject; yet Alice was struck by her tone of voice, for it was unusually grave. Alice gave the answer; but Mrs Clifford did not seem to regard it. She was watching Florence and Ruth.

'I have told Mrs Clifford the history,' continued Miss Merton, 'without mentioning Mademoiselle Le Vergnier's name, and she quite agrees with me in thinking Miss Trevelyan decidedly mistaken, to say the least.'

'Is it a long history?' inquired Alice, not liking openly to say how much she wished to hear it.

'Rather, if I were to tell you all,' replied Miss Merton; 'but did Miss Trevelyan never mention the subject to you?'

'I have heard something about a governess,' said Alice, feeling ashamed of the equivocation, and yet not thinking herself at liberty to speak more plainly.

'I should have supposed you would have known the whole affair,' continued Miss Merton; 'for this French governess had something to do with Mrs Carter. She was not exactly a pupil; but Mrs Carter, I know, was very much interested about her, and indeed kept friends with her much longer than any one else would have done.'

'But what was the story?' asked Alice.

'I can scarcely tell you in detail—dinner would be ended before I had half finished, if I were to try—but I can give it you shortly. Though I should not wish Miss Trevelyan to know we were talking about it,' she added, observing that the eyes of Florence were fixed upon them.

'Oh! never mind,' replied Alice, eager above all things to hear the truth of Justine's history. 'No one can hear across the table, there is such a noise.'

'My authority is very good,' observed Miss Merton; 'for this French girl, Mademoiselle Le Vergnier—you must recollect her now, surely?'

Digitized by Google

'Yes—the name—I knew her a little,' replied Alice, hurriedly.

'Mademoiselle Le Vergnier was governess to some cousins of Mary Vernon's, the Darnleys. They lived not very far from us when we were in Shropshire, and they were very good people—rather strict, but still extremely respected—and I am sure they would not for the world have told a falsehood. They took this Justine le Vergnier, upon a recommendation of some old friends, to be a governess. Mary Vernon heard of it, and not having a good opinion of her, was rather worried at the notion. She wrote, I know, to Mrs Carter about it, and Mrs Carter gave Mrs Darnley a hint to be watchful as to books, and conversation, and that sort of thing; but the children were very young, and Mrs Carter said that it would be a perfect charity if Justine could be for some time in a steady family; and she really hoped that she was much improved and likely to do well. So she went there, and at first it was all very smooth, and Mrs Darnley liked her extremely. At the end of six months Mr and Mrs Darnley were called away from home upon some very special business, and they thought as they had a good nurse, they might leave Justine with the children for about a week. She made all sorts of promises, and they went away perfectly satisfied. They came back rather suddenly, late at night. Of course Justine was to have been there to meet them; but she was not; no one knew anything about her; the children were in bed, and the servants in the kitchen; but there was no Mademoiselle Le Vergnier. About half-past eleven she came in, very much distressed and surprised of course, but she had an admirable excuse ready. A young friend, lately come to the neighbourhood, had, she said, been taken very ill, and had sent to beg her to go to her; and as there was no one in the house whose permission she could ask, she had gone, after seeing that the children were safe in bed. It seemed strange that she should have told nothing to the servants; but she gave some plausible reason—I forget what—and Mrs Darnley began to think it was all right.'

'And was it really so?' inquired Alice.

'No, indeed. I cannot tell you how the truth came out; it was only by degrees. She kept up the deception wonderfully even about the sick friend; but at last it was discovered that this going out was a constant practice, and that she was in the habit of visiting not only the sick friend, but all her family,

Digitized by Google

without Mrs Darnley's knowledge. And what made it infinitely worse, these people were persons whom her father particularly objected to her knowing, or having anything to do with. You may suppose there was an end to her situation at Mrs Darnley's, and she was sent home as fast as possible.'

'It was wrong—extremely wrong,' said Alice, looking very thoughtful. 'Are you quite sure it is true?'

'Yes; how could I be mistaken? The Darnleys are Mary Vernon's cousins; the moment all this was known they wrote to her to tell her of it. Mary had some correspondence with Justine herself.'

'But Mary never said anything to Ruth in any of her letters,' observed Alice.

'No, because Mary is careful and charitable, and will never say a word against any person if she can possibly help it; and such a story as this must be the ruin of Justine with every one. I should never have heard it, but that a friend of mine had some thoughts of engaging her: then Mary told me the whole history, a great deal more than I have told you.'

'And did Mary think that nothing could ever be done for Justine?' inquired Alice.

'She was extremely unhappy about her, especially after she had prevented my friend from engaging her. It seemed, she said, as if she had done Justine an injury; and I know that she gave her money through Mrs Carter, and managed at one time to procure her some pupils for drawing and French lessons merely, where she could do no harm. But it was impossible for her to keep up the acquaintance, because she herself is quite young, and her father and aunt would highly have disapproved of it.'

'But you have not said anything about Florence yet,' said Alice.

'Miss Trevelyan—oh, I forgot. But do you know,'—and Miss Merton blushed—'I am not at all sure I have been doing right in talking to you in this way. I don't think Mary Vernon would have done it. I began from fancying that as you appeared such a great friend of Miss Trevelyan's, you might have heard all the affair before, and then I was led on I don't know how. Really, I believe it was very wrong.'

'But you must finish now,' said Alice, with a little brusqueness of manner, and not at all sympathising with her companion's self-reproach. 'I think you are bound to tell me what you have to say against Florence.'

Digitized by Google

'Not against her, that is such a hard expression,' said Miss Merton, looking very uncomfortable.

'But I should like to know what it is you have to say,' persisted Alice, who perceived that the party was on the point of breaking up, and was anxious to learn all that could be told before she was separated from her new acquaintance.

'After all, you may think it more a difference of opinion than any real harm,' replied Miss Merton. 'I believe Miss Trevelyan had been in the habit of corresponding with Mademoiselle Le Vergnier, and when this unfortunate business was discovered, Justine wrote to give her version of it; and, although Miss Trevelyan was told the whole history, even to the most minute details, she took Justine's part, and actually persuaded her father and mother to invite her to Cromer Court.'

'But if she believed Justine innocent,' said Alice, 'how could it be wrong?'

'How was she to be the judge?' said Miss Merton. 'How could she know more of Justine's character than the Darnleys and Mrs Carter? Mrs Carter tried to stop the acquaintance, but Miss Trevelyan is such a favourite at home, that she was allowed to do just what she liked. The friendship went on, and goes on still, I believe, though I have not heard of it lately; and I don't know what has become of Mademoiselle Le Vergnier. I rather think she went back to her father after staying at Cromer Court.'

'Alice, my dear,' said Mrs Clifford, 'where are your thoughts?'

Alice started.

'We are left nearly the last, you see,' said Mrs Clifford, smiling.

Alice rose mechanically, and stood looking about, as if not knowing what to do. Whilst listening to Miss Merton, her imagination had strayed far away from the picnic.

'I am afraid you will think me very unkind,' whispered Miss Merton.

'Oh, no, not at all; I am glad to have heard.' Alice did not think of saying anything more; she was not used to society, and allowed herself to be absorbed and rendered absent by any subject which might be uppermost at the moment. Whether Miss Merton was annoyed or not was just then a question of no consequence, her whole mind being set upon telling Ruth what she had learned.

Digitized by Google

Florence Trevelyan joined her almost immediately on their leaving the tilt-yard. Miss Merton went to her uncle, and Mrs Clifford begged Ruth to remain with her.

The first observation which Florence made showed what was in her thoughts. 'Well, Alice, how have you been getting on? You and Miss Merton seemed to be making immense friends.'

Alice made a short reply, and continued her own train of thought, which related chiefly to the conduct of Florence. Alice could not doubt that Florence was sincere in her belief of Justine's innocence, but she still could not reconcile it to herself that Florence should credit Justine's own version of her story, against such glaring facts as had now been related. Neither had Florence been open in all she had said to Alice, when first speaking of Justine; she had mentioned Mrs Carter, in a general way, as prejudiced; as believing idle stories from hearsay; whereas, from Miss Merton's account, Mrs Carter was fully aware of every circumstance. Florence had not said anything positively untrue, but she had contrived to mystify the whole affair. Alice felt that she could not trust her as she had done before, and she longed to ask a fuller explanation, but in honour to Miss Merton she could not repeat what had been said. All these thoughts rendered her silent, and she continually looked round for Ruth, wishing that she would come, till Florence was provoked, and declared she would join a party which was before them, and go to the watch-tower with them, for Alice was really too stupid to be a companion on a picnic. This remark had no effect in bringing out Alice's private thoughts, which were what Florence really desired to know. She only repeated her desire to see Ruth, and at length insisted upon sitting down to wait for her.

Florence would not leave her, notwithstanding her threat; she seemed to have an instinctive knowledge that all would go wrong with her schemes if she went away. 'Here they are,' she exclaimed, after they had waited nearly ten minutes, 'Ruth, and Mrs Clifford, and my aunt. How long you have kept us!' pursued Florence, addressing Ruth, as the party came up.

'Ruth,' observed Alice, 'you look pale; are you ill?'

'No, thank you.'

If Ruth was not ill she was very nervous and hurried. Alice asked her again if anything was the matter.

'Nothing, nothing!' She put her arm within that of Florence, and walked on very fast.

Digitized by Google

Alice was more hurt than angry. This second appearance of neglect was more than she could well bear.

They now began to descend a winding path, through the low shrubs and copsewood which covered the ravine between the castle and the watch-tower hill. The way was rough, and only one person could go abreast. Their progress was not very speedy, and Florence and Ruth were soon out of sight.

'Ruth has forgotten her sketching-book,' said Mrs Clifford; 'do, Alice, run after her, and beg them not to go so fast, we shall never be able to keep up with them.'

And Alice hastened on, thinking that she should overtake Ruth almost immediately; this, however, was not so easily done. Ruth and Florence walked quickly, and when Alice reached a spot where two ways met, she found nothing to show her in which direction to proceed. She took the one which appeared the least overgrown, and proceeded for some little distance, though without seeing any sign of her companions. Then she thought it would be better to go back; but by this time Mrs Clifford and the rest of the party had passed the turning, and taken the contrary path, so that Alice was left behind by all.

CHAPTER LIV.

IN the meantime Ruth had hurried Florence forward with the intention of outstripping the rest of the party, and when they reached a sufficient distance she stopped for a moment, and exclaimed, 'O Florence! this unhappy business with Justine, it has made me miserable. I have done so wrong!'

'How? what can have happened?' asked Florence, turning pale.

'I have deceived,' exclaimed Ruth, in a tone of bitter self-reproach; 'I have deceived mamma, wilfully. I have all but told a story. What will she think of me?'

'Ruth, what do you mean? what can Mrs Clifford know?'

'I cannot tell what she has heard,' replied Ruth, 'but she must have some suspicions; not about me though; she would never suspect me, and that makes it much worse; and I never meant to deceive her; I would not do it for all the world. Florence, I am so very unhappy!'

Digitized by Google

'Pray be quick,' exclaimed Florence, hastening on; 'we shall be overtaken in a minute, and I must understand what you are talking of.'

'Mamma stopped me as we left the dinner-table,' said Ruth. 'She looked very anxious and worried, and asked me if you had not a friend staying with you. I said, "Yes." Then she asked me if she was not a French girl, who was going to be governess to Agnes, and I said "Yes" too. Then she wanted to know if I had ever seen her, and I was puzzled what to say, when Mrs De Lacy came up to us; she had heard just the last words, and said, "Oh! it is Mademoiselle Veray you are talking of?" Mamma turned to me and said—"That was not the name of the young lady whom you knew at Mrs Carter's, was it, Ruth?"'

'Of course you said No,' interrupted Florence.

'Yes, I did not know what else to say, but I was wretched directly I had done it; and mamma smiled, and said she was glad to hear that it was not the same person; and then Mrs De Lacy went on talking about Justine, and remarked what a pleasing girl she was, and asked if I did not think so. She said that you had recommended her, and that you had a good many French acquaintances; and she seemed to think that Justine had never been in any situation as governess before; and all the time I was obliged to let everything go on as if I did not know a word about it. Florence, I cannot bear to deceive mamma, and I must tell her.'

'If you do,' said Florence, quickly, 'you will break your word, and destroy Justine's prospects for life.'

'I am very sorry for Justine,' said Ruth; 'I would help her if I possibly could, but there is nothing else to be done; and for my promise, you know that it was made only for a time. I had no idea of always keeping a secret from my mother.'

'Then you should not have given your word,' persisted Florence. 'Justine and I have depended upon you, and have made all our arrangements under the belief that you would not break it. If you betray us, Justine will be injured for life.'

'You have never told me yet how that could be, said Ruth; 'all I have heard has been from Alice.'

'I shall wait for Justine to tell you,' replied Florence. 'Her own account will convince you of the truth, far better than anything I can say.'

'I cannot hear her account,' said Ruth.

Digitized by Google

'Go back with us this evening, and you shall; I will manage it. At any rate, do not be unjust and condemn her unheard.'

'If I had not deceived mamma!' said Ruth, speaking to herself.

'It was not intentional deceit,' replied Florence; 'but whether it was so or not, this is a case of justice. Justine wrote to you herself, I know, begging you to give her some advice. If you betray her beforehand, I must say it will be, according to my notions, very dishonourable.'

'She might trust mamma as well as me, if it were right to keep her secret,' said Ruth.

'That is not the question. Justine knows nothing of your mamma, and she does know a great deal of you. She has the greatest respect for you, and I know would take any hints from you; even as to her management of Agnes.'

'I cannot believe that,' said Ruth.

'I do not ask you to believe it on my word. I only ask you to wait till you have seen Justine yourself. You have no idea what she thinks of you. Ruth, you cannot be so unkind as to persist.'

Ruth looked unhappy, and sat down to rest under the shade of a tree, but would say nothing. Florence repeated her arguments, and became more and more earnest.

'Your mamma and my aunt are coming,' she said, on hearing voices; 'have you no pity, Ruth?'

But she could not extract another promise. Mrs De Lacy and Mrs Clifford came up to them; the former quickened her pace on seeing them, and hastily addressing Florence, said—

'I have been hearing a strange story from Mrs Clifford, my dear Florence, about a young French governess; Mrs Clifford heard it from Miss Merton; it made me extremely uncomfortable for the moment. I began to think'——

'Oh! yes, I know that story,' interrupted Florence. 'You remember, Ruth—the French girl who was at Mrs Carter's.'

Ruth rose up suddenly in great agitation. Mrs Clifford thought she understood the cause, and hastening to change a conversation which might bring painful recollections to Ruth's mind, said—

'I have been satisfying Mrs De Lacy's mind; I told her that Ruth had seen this young lady whom she has engaged as a

Digitized by Google

governess, and knew that she was not the same who visited at Mrs Carter's.'

'Yes, that day we first met at Redford; Ruth saw her for an instant,' said Florence to her aunt; 'but indeed, Aunt De Lacy, I cannot think why Miss Merton should repeat things against persons who cannot defend themselves.'

'I daresay she meant no harm,' replied Mrs De Lacy, good-naturedly; 'but you can imagine I was a little startled for the moment. However, Mrs Clifford's assurance quite satisfied me. 'But how does it happen,' she added, looking round, 'that Miss Lennox is not with you?'

'We sent her after you, Ruth, with a sketch-book,' said Mrs Clifford; 'you must have seen her, surely.'

'We walked fast,' observed Florence, delighted at the prospect of introducing another subject; 'had we not better turn back and look for her?'

Mrs Clifford objected to this, saying that Ruth appeared already so tired, she thought it would not do for her to go any farther. Colonel Merton just then came up alone. The ladies of his party, he said, were afraid of mounting the hill. He had seen nothing of Alice, but seemed to think it very likely she had mistaken her way.

'Yes, just at that turning,' exclaimed Florence, 'where two paths meet. I remember thinking at the time it was very possible.'

Colonel Merton proposed to return, but Mrs Clifford appeared uneasy, and said that she would rather go herself, as Alice was under her charge. 'Ruth, my love,' she added, 'you had better not attempt reaching the top of the hill. Wait here till we all come back.' Ruth assented, and Florence insisted on remaining with her.

Once more Florence and Ruth were alone. Ruth leaned her head upon her hand, gazing vacantly on the scene beneath them. The smooth grass of the watch-tower hill sloped to the edge of the ravine they had just crossed, on the other side of which the gray castle walls were discovered at intervals, amidst the mass of underwood that clothed the descent. Two ruined towers, and the top of the battlemented gateway, were seen to the left, and to the right rose the large trees shadowing the tilt-yard. Between the castle and the sea, where the sides of the ravine were less steep, the land projected in a sharp point, forming the extremity of a small bay. Several fishing boats

Digitized by Google

lay stranded upon the beach, and two or three skiffs were passing near the shore; and in the far distance, where the blue line of the sea blended with the warm, misty tints of the horizon, two ships of war, crowded with sails, were slowly traversing the wide ocean. It was a very lovely view, and Florence remarked upon it, but Ruth's only reply was a sigh that proceeded from the depths of her heart. Florence asked what was the matter, and Ruth's distress broke forth in a torrent of words—'Florence was deceitful, misjudging; she had entered upon a wrong course; she ought certainly to give up Justine; it was really wicked to mislead her aunt, besides being foolish. The truth might be discovered at any moment. If Miss Merton were to see Justine, it must be known. For herself she was wretched, and resolved no longer to bear the concealment.' To all which, Florence replied much in the same strain as before, urging that Ruth could be no judge of what was right until she had spoken to Justine herself; promising that if there was no opportunity of a conversation, Justine should write full details of every circumstance, and ending with stating that she had no wish to deceive her aunt for a continuance; she only wished her not to look at Justine with prejudiced eyes. When they should be in France, and Justine should have gained herself a place in Mrs De Lacy's estimation, as she assuredly would do if Ruth would only give her a few notions as to the management of Agnes, the truth was to be told; it was simply the dread of Mrs Carter's prejudices which induced them both for the present to desire secrecy. This sounded very plausible. Ruth piqued herself upon being reasonable; she was inclined to come round again; but then the deceit. Florence perceived that she had gained a step, and turned to another point, one which she really felt herself, and which therefore she spoke of with seriousness. It was the importance to Justine of obtaining a situation; the distress to which she might be reduced if she could not do so.

'Justine will go back to her miserable home, Ruth, and be wretched,' she said, 'No one will help her, and she will be so poor that she will hardly have bread to eat. She told me one day that there have been times when she has had nothing to do, that she and her father have really not known how to get a dinner.'

Ruth's eyes filled with tears. 'I would give her all my money,' she said, 'if I could; but I have promised it in the village.'

Digitized by Google

Florence smiled with an air of contempt, and asked if she thought a few shillings would keep Justine for life.

'I was only wishing,' replied Ruth. 'I would do anything to help her except deceive mamma.'

'Then be satisfied,' exclaimed Florence. 'To-night you shall hear all from Justine herself, and she shall write a letter which you may be able to show your mamma, explaining everything; and when we are in France, and I tell my aunt, you shall tell Mrs Clifford; only be kind now.'

Ruth wavered; she asked when she should have this written explanation.

'Immediately—to-morrow, if possible. Indeed, you shall have it.'

At that instant a distinct shrill cry broke upon the ear. Ruth started up.

'Florence, what was that?' She seized the arm of Florence and trembled extremely.

'I don't know; it is an accident. Something has happened —hark!'

The cry sounded again more faintly. Colonel Merton ran down the hill. 'Did you hear it?' he said, as he passed.

'Yes. What is it?—where? Aunt De Lacy, what is it?'

Colonel Merton had rushed on. Mrs De Lacy was beckoning them to follow her by a shorter and steeper path than that by which they had ascended. Florence dragged Ruth after her. Breathless and giddy, they reached the foot of the ravine.

'Go, Florence! For pity's sake, find out what has happened,' exclaimed Mrs De Lacy. 'Take the path to the left; follow Colonel Merton.'

Ruth's strength was nearly exhausted; but she gave no heed to Mrs De Lacy's entreaties that she would remain behind; and still holding the hand of Florence, they pursued their way amidst the tangled briers along the narrow pathway worn along the top of the ravine. A large oak-tree stood on the bank, its gnarled trunk and knotted branches spreading themselves out so as completely to obstruct both the pathway and the view. Florence held by the trunk, and with difficulty scrambled over the brambles which grew upon the steep edge of the descent. Voices were heard very near below them.

'Be quick, Ruth, pray!' she exclaimed.

Ruth's dress was caught in the briers; it was rent completely across, and they hurried forward.

Digitized by Google

'Stop, Ruth—hark!' and Florence stepped forward upon a bank which commanded the whole length of the ravine. A faint scream made Ruth spring to her side, without the power of asking the cause.

Below, upon a smooth space of grass, Alice lay, pale as death, her head resting upon Mrs Clifford's lap; her eyes nearly closed, and the marks of severe bruises upon her face. Colonel Merton and several gentlemen were near, and on the summit of the castle wall above there stood a party anxiously looking on, and entreating to be told how they might render assistance. Ruth's first impulse was to slide down the bank and reach her mamma; but the descent was not practicable, and when she spoke no one answered or noticed her. Alice was not senseless, for she gave signs of suffering extreme pain. The sound of her voice, though it was heard only in a groan, relieved Ruth's extreme anxiety; whatever had happened, Alice was not dead. Mrs Clifford retained her usual calm self-possession, and decided at once what it would be best to do. A pathway was hastily cleared by some of the gentlemen, and Colonel Merton then lifted Alice gently in his arms and carried her, though slowly and with difficulty, up the steep bank.

Florence and Ruth could see no more. When the last of the party had disappeared, Ruth sat down on the grass and burst into tears. Florence looked about to discover how the accident had happened.

'She must have been clambering over the wall and have fallen,' she said. 'Yes, there are the marks all the way from the top. See, Ruth, above.'

Ruth turned, and saw at once what had occurred. Alice, finding herself alone, had amused herself by exploring the ruins, and having no one to guide her, had ventured upon a dangerous part; the loose stones had given way, and she had been precipitated over the walls half way down the bank. The height of the walls at that particular spot was not very great, and her descent had been broken by the underwood; but a large stone lay close by the spot on which she had been extended, showing the fearful peril from which, by a merciful Providence, she had been in a great measure saved.

Ruth passed her hand for an instant before her eyes; partly to shut out from view the horrible probability which imagination presented, partly from the deep feeling of awe, which made her utter a silent thanksgiving for Alice's preservation. Then,

Digitized by Google

without speaking another word, she turned slowly away and retraced her steps to the spot where Mrs De Lacy was waiting for them.

CHAPTER LV.

THERE were lights shining through the windows of the Manor the whole of that night; moving, flickering, now clear, now dim, at intervals entirely disappearing; but there was one which never changed; it burned with a dull flame, immovable as the dark, silent figure which sat by the table on which it was placed, neither reading, nor speaking, nor praying, save in the secrecy of the sorrowful heart, open only to the Eye of God. Lady Catharine watched by Alice's bedside, though she was told that watching was unnecessary. Alice had received a severe injury, but she was young and of a vigorous constitution, and many who had suffered more severely had speedily recovered—a night's rest might do wonders. This was the opinion of Lady Catharine's medical attendant, and there was nothing in it to excite alarm; yet Lady Catharine resisted all Marsham's persuasions to leave the task of nursing to her, and not consenting even to rest on the sofa so as to be within call, which was all that was really required, devoted the weary hours of the night to meditation and prayer. There was much to engage her mind. We say that death is near us at every moment; but perhaps we seldom actually realise the truth, until we have been unexpectedly brought in contact with it. Alice had escaped an imminent peril; but the escape brought many most painful thoughts to Lady Catharine's remembrance. It almost forced her to recall the distressing doubts which had harassed her since her conversation with Mr Clifford. One of the common arguments which she herself had often used, and had heard others use, to bring young persons to a sense of their religious obligations, was 'If you are not fit for confirmation and the Holy Communion, you are not fit to die.' Alice had been all but pronounced unfit for confirmation; and God had been pleased to bring her awfully near to death. However insensible she might be to the risk she had run, and the Providence which had preserved her, Lady Catharine saw it full well. With that one most terrible doubt as to the state of Alice's heart,

Digitized by Google

came the others which, from Lady Catharine's sincerity of purpose, necessarily accompanied them; and the most rigid earthly scrutiniser of human motives must have been satisfied by her survey of her own conduct with regard to Alice. On no occasion had it been made more carefully or more truly; for Mr Clifford's suggestions had taken root in a mind which, however naturally prejudiced, was never wilfully shut against truth.

They were sad thoughts for the still, silent night, and when morning dawned, Lady Catharine's face told the mental as well as physical fatigue which she had been enduring. But her spirit was still unfailing; she gave all the necessary orders for the day; took her breakfast as usual, and not till eleven o'clock, when the medical man had again seen Alice, and pronounced that she was going on well, allowed herself to have two or three hours' rest. And during all that time no one would have imagined that Lady Catharine had any thoughts or any fears beyond those which the state of circumstances might naturally occasion. When she went to Alice and asked whether she would like to have prayers read for her, or would prefer repeating them for herself, no one would have supposed that the answer was listened for with the most intense anxiety, as an indication of the tone of Alice's mind. And when Alice asked for a book, and Lady Catharine remarked that she had not herself read the Psalms and Lessons for the day, no one would have discovered any change of countenance to show the sinking of heart with which the reply was received—'I don't think I can attend to those things now. I should like something amusing.'

Alice was suffering much pain at the time: possibly she might not have been able to fix her thoughts seriously; but Lady Catharine read in the words that the will was wanting, and she turned away because Alice should not see her tears.

'Has any one been here from the Parsonage, Marsham?' said Alice, groaning with pain, as she tried to move.

'A message to know how you were, miss; nothing else.'

'Some one will come, I hope,' said Alice. 'I wish Ruth would. Give me a book, please, Marsham.'

The book was given, and the pages were turned over; but Alice's head was not in any state for reading. It was swollen from a severe bruise, and ached and throbbed till she could not bear it; and again she inquired for Ruth.

'Lady Catharine wanted to know if you would like to be read to just now, Miss Lennox,' said Marsham. 'Please to

Digitized by Google

keep your hand down, and be still; the doctor says you must be quiet.'

'I can't, Marsham, my head is so very bad. Lady Catharine wanted to read the Psalms and Lessons; but I can't attend.'

'Her ladyship would have read anything you liked,' observed Marsham. 'She was all in a fidget to do something for you.'

'She is not here, is she?' said Alice, in a whisper, and trying to look round.

'Oh, no, miss; she has gone to lie down; you know she sat up with you all night.'

Alice looked surprised. 'Did she? I was so stupid, so dizzy, I did not know who was here exactly. Is she very tired?'

'More so a great deal than she will say, I suspect,' said Marsham. 'Her ladyship is not a person to make complaints, you know, Miss Lennox.'

'It was very kind of her. Oh, my head! Marsham, do make the bandage loose.'

'My lady would not let anybody do anything for you but herself, if she could help it,' said Marsham, in a tone of some irritation. 'There is nobody like her for a nurse when anything is the matter.'

'Yes, I daresay. Marsham, how you hurt me!'

Marsham loosened the bandage, but not the more gently for Alice's exclamation. 'My lady was always famed for a kind heart,' continued Marsham. 'I have lived with her now fifteen years, and I never knew her once hear of any one being ill without helping to the very utmost.'

'That is why she wants to nurse me then,' said Alice, shortly, but less pettishly.

'O Miss Lennox; you don't think that?'

'No! why not?' asked Alice.

'Because you know you are different from anybody else with my lady. We all say, very often, that it is quite wonderful how fond she is of you; but then she was so fond of your poor mamma.'

'Fond of me!' repeated Alice to herself; and then she added aloud, 'Marsham, do you remember my mamma well?'

'Remember her, Miss Lennox! yes, indeed. It would be strange indeed if I could forget her. Such a sweet face she had, and her ways so gentle!'

This was said with rather a severe glance at Alice, which,

Digitized by Google

however, was not noticed.—'I used to take her fruit from my lady nearly every day,' continued Marsham. 'It was my lady's own wish that I should go, because she said I could tell better than any one else what was wanted. There she used to be sitting up by the window, with the little round table, that my lady gave her on her birthday, always by her side, and her books upon it, and the greenhouse flowers put in so beautifully. My lady dressed the flowers for her every day when she went to see her. Your poor mamma had a great fancy for flowers; and when she took to her bed she used to have them always lying by her. And then my lady would sit by and look at her; and sometimes I used to catch a few words when I came in, and it was almost always about you, Miss Lennox.'

Alice again put her hand to her head to alter the bandage: but this time she did not complain.

'One day, I remember especially,' continued Marsham, 'your poor mamma had been very ill—so faint they could hardly keep her alive; but she was a little better, and my lady was putting eau de Cologne and water to her forehead. Your mamma looked up and smiled, and said something about "always kind," and just then you peeped in at the door, and my lady made a sign to you to go away, and when you were gone I heard her say, "You will not mind my sending Alice away, it is only for your sake." Your mamma's answer was spoken out so strong, Miss Lennox. "She is your child," she said; and my lady stooped down, and whispered something very low, which I could not hear; but your mamma answered, "God bless you and reward you," and then you were called in and my lady kissed you.'

'I think I remember the kiss,' said Alice, thoughtfully.

'My lady's manner changed to you from that day, Miss Alice,' continued Marsham. 'It seemed to me as if she began to give you the love which was your poor mamma's. I don't mean that she did not go on loving her; but it was in a different way. Your mamma was so ill, there seemed to be no reason to care about any common things for her; only just to make her as comfortable as could be for the time. There were no troubles about money and dress, and such things for her; she was gone beyond them. She looked like an angel; and my lady used sometimes to say to me that she could hardly fancy it right to talk about common things before her; and so all her anxiety, in a way, went to you, Miss Alice.'

Digitized by Google

Alice shut her eyes; it might have been either from pain of body or of mind.

'Shall you be going to sleep now, do you think?' inquired Marsham.

'I don't know—I am not sleepy. When will Lady Catharine come back?'

'Not for a long time, I hope,' answered Marsham. 'She will wear herself out if she goes on as she has begun.'

'Then, Marsham, you may give me the Prayer Book, and I will try to read the Psalms.'

Marsham gave it, with an injunction that she was to leave off directly she found the reading tire her head; and Alice soon laid the book down, and fell into a disturbed sleep.

CHAPTER LVI.

LADY CATHARINE was sitting in Alice's morning room; it was the first day that Alice had been allowed to leave her bed. It gave her much pain still to be dressed, and she was weakened by all she had suffered. A short illness will sometimes make a great change in a young person, and Alice was looking very unwell. She lay upon the sofa at work, and seemed to be thinking more than usual. Lady Catharine regarded her silently and anxiously. Now and then Alice asked a few questions, rather, it seemed, because she thought she ought to talk, than from any wish for conversation, and frequently had recourse to a book. When Lady Catharine was called out of the room, Alice drew a paper from her work-basket, and read it with much attention. It was in Madeline's handwriting. Lady Catharine's re-entrance made her fold it up, and put it again in its hiding-place. In her haste she threw down the basket, and scattered the contents upon the floor. She was not able to pick them up herself, but Lady Catharine did, and as she took up the papers, she said—

'Is this from Madeline?'

'Yes;' and Alice coloured. 'It was something she sent me yesterday; will you give it to me?' she held out her hand, which trembled a little.

Digitized by Google

Lady Catharine took hold of it affectionately, and said, 'Poor child!' and kissed her.

Alice held the paper as if fearing either that it should be taken from her, or that some inquiry might be made about it.

Lady Catharine smoothed her pillow, and proposed that she should have some grapes, which had just been brought in from the hot-house.

Alice said 'Yes;' and thanked her, and looked as if she would have said more, but was afraid.

Lady Catharine was not quick at interpreting looks. She heard only Alice's 'Thank you;' and it was cold to her warm feelings. She sighed, and sat down; and after a little while left the room again. She had not been long absent, before a lighter and freer step was heard in the gallery; a gentle knock was given at the door of Alice's room, and, scarcely waiting for the permission to be given, Madeline opened it. The change in Alice's manner was instantaneous. Madeline was told how Alice had slept, how she was then feeling, whether she had enjoyed her dinner; and being satisfied upon these points, she produced some particularly choice flowers, gathered from her own garden. Lady Catharine would have had real cause to sigh if she had witnessed the hearty gratitude with which this trifling present was received; yet it might have proved to her, that, whatever might be Alice's defect of manner to herself, there was no real coldness of heart.

'And you have been reading the extracts?' said Madeline, observing the corner of the paper half-hidden in the work-basket. 'I was glad papa let me copy them for you. Are they not very nice?'

'Yes, I think so; I have not read much of them. Lady Catharine said your papa preached a beautiful sermon on Sunday.'

'I longed for you to hear it,' continued Madeline.

'Did you?' and Alice faintly smiled; 'it would have been no good.'

'Oh! but, Alice, pray don't talk so. I thought all that papa says would have brought you round.'

'It is very kind in you, Maddy,' replied Alice; 'I really am very much obliged to you for taking so much trouble, writing all this out for me; but as things are fixed they must remain.'

'And Ruth is so strange too,' observed Madeline. 'I hoped

Digitized by Google

she would have talked to you, but I can scarcely make her attend to me. She sits thinking all day nearly.'

'Ruth knows it is best to let things remain as they are,' repeated Alice.

'Have you asked her?' inquired Madeline.

'No, I have only seen her for a few minutes, twice. We did talk about the confirmation then. Had you any letters to-day?'

This last question was put very abruptly; and Madeline hastily answered in the negative, and then observed, 'I think Ruth would agree with me, and papa too.'

'It can make no difference,' replied Alice; 'I may be very wicked, but I am not a hypocrite.'

'If you wish to be confirmed, there is no hypocrisy in saying so,' observed Madeline.

Alice shook her head, and answered, that if she ever intended to be good, she would be good thoroughly. Lady Catharine had been so kind lately, that she could not pretend anything with her; besides, she was ill; she should not be well enough for the confirmation.

Madeline sat for some minutes with an air of great disappointment; then, leaving her seat, she stood beside Alice, and looking at her earnestly and sorrowfully, said, 'If you were ill, Alice, very ill indeed, you would be extremely sorry not to have been confirmed.'

'I do not see why I should be much more sorry about it then than now,' answered Alice.

'Don't you? It seems to me as if you must be. If you were confirmed you might receive the Holy Communion.'

Alice raised herself on the sofa, and said eagerly, 'Maddy, do not talk of that.'

'But I must, Alice; you must let me indeed,' continued Madeline. 'I would try not to vex you, but it will be such a weight on my mind if you do not let me tell you;' and, finding Alice did not again interrupt her, she went on: 'the evening you were brought home I seemed to think only about your pain; I did not imagine there could be any danger; but the next day Marsham told mamma she thought you were more hurt than people fancied, and she was afraid of fever. Mamma said this to papa before me; I don't think she quite meant me to hear, but I happened to be coming into the room. I was dreadfully frightened, and I began talking to papa all about you, and

Digitized by Google

about—you must not mind, Alice; you know it was only our fear—about—that perhaps you might not get well. He seemed very unhappy indeed. I had never seen him in such a way before, and at last something was mentioned about the confirmation; and then, Alice, do you know, I saw the tears in his eyes—real tears; I had never seen any man cry before, and I scarcely believed till then that men could cry; but papa was just like one of us then, and he said it was such a grief to him to think that you had not appeared to care about your confirmation, because it showed that your mind was not in a right state; and he went on to say that it would have been a great blessing if you had been confirmed, or if you were really fit for it and anxious about it; because then, if you were to be worse, he might give you the Holy Communion.'

'If I was not confirmed?' inquired Alice.

'Yes, because it does not say in the Prayer Book, that persons must be confirmed first; only that they must be, if they can.'

Alice appeared to be struck by a new and very serious idea, but one which perplexed her. 'I should not be sure of going to Heaven,' she replied, 'even if I were to receive the Communion.'

'That was what I said,' exclaimed Madeline. 'I could not understand papa at first. I could not think how it could be of such great consequence; but papa grew so very, very earnest. He said that, of course, receiving the Holy Communion would not save us; and if we received it unprepared it would be harm to us instead of good: but that none of us knew the great blessing we missed by neglecting it. And then he read to me parts of the sixth chapter of St John, which is all about it; and certainly the words seemed much more solemn than they had ever done before. They made me feel as if I could not bear to die before I had received it, and as if I could not bear that you, or any one I loved, should do so either.'

'And did you come to talk about this to-day?' inquired Alice.

'Partly. I was afraid; but still it was in my mind so much, I thought I must say it. O Alice, dear Alice! if you would only think of these things!'

The conversation was interrupted by the return of Lady Catharine. Madeline rose hurriedly and wished Alice good-bye; then, recollecting herself, inquired if she could take back

Digitized by Google

any message or parcel to the Parsonage; and hearing that there was nothing to be said, only the report that Alice was much the same, she departed.

Alice closed her eyes but not to sleep; rather to repeat, and think upon, and vainly try to forget the eager winning words, 'O Alice! dear Alice! if you would only think of these things!'

CHAPTER LVII.

ALICE'S first visitor from the Parsonage the following day was Ruth. They met in Alice's bedroom, for she was not able to leave it till late in the morning. Ruth came in very differently from Madeline—slowly, and with a very grave preoccupied air. She asked the ordinary questions as to how Alice had slept, and whether she was in much pain; and then she put a shabby-looking paper into Alice's hand, saying: 'Read that, and tell me what you think of it. It came from Mrs De Lacy's housekeeper, and contained an apology for returning a parcel which Mrs Clifford had forwarded to Sheldon, as Mrs De Lacy and her family were gone.' The note dropped from Alice's hand.

'Gone!' she exclaimed, 'gone! where to?—what does it mean?—without your hearing from Justine?'

'Yes, without a word. I told you Florence promised she should write; but I have not had a line or a message.'

Alice's face expressed a strange mixture of feeling; satisfaction for a moment, then regret.

'And what do you mean to do?' she inquired.

'I don't know; I cannot think.'

'Justine must be gone with them,' said Alice.

'I suppose so; but one cannot say.'

'Gone as Agnes De Lacy's governess,' said Alice, her countenance becoming even more grave than Ruth's.

'Yes, I hope it is all right; one could not have prevented it; and, of course, they will write;' but Ruth did not say this as if her conscience was clear, and she repeated a second time, 'I hope it is all right.'

'It cannot be,' said Alice; 'I must try and tell you now,

Digitized by Google

Ruth, what I could not yesterday; what I heard from Miss Merton.'

Ruth brought a chair to the bed-side, and listened attentively, yet with the air of one who has no wish to be convinced. Alice was always suffering most in the morning, and her head ached and was very confused. She told her story with difficulty, and without being clear in the several details. Ruth cross-questioned her rather captiously, and not without commenting severely upon Miss Merton's imprudence and want of charity in saying so much to a perfect stranger. 'She could not thoroughly believe second-hand stories,' she said; 'Alice had heard from Miss Merton what Miss Merton had heard from some one else, and what some one else had heard perhaps from another party. It would be a great satisfaction to have Justine's own version to put against all these accusations.'

'And you expect it?' inquired Alice.

'Yes, certainly; I can account for not hearing. They set off suddenly, and had not time to write.'

'Then you will say nothing till you do hear?' continued Alice.

The question made Ruth shrink. She began to reason, as she always did when unpleasant things were brought before her. She said why it would be right to tell her mamma at once, and why it would not be right; but the one right was put in few words, the other in many; and the many gained the victory, Ruth believing still that she had stated the case fairly. 'Florence,' she said, 'had certainly appeared candid and well-intentioned, in all that had passed when they met at St Cuthbert's, and Justine might be open to good influence, even at a distance. It would be a pity to throw them off, unless it was absolutely necessary. When all the statements on both sides could be placed before Mrs Clifford and Lady Catharine, then would be the time to acknowledge what they had done; till then it would not be fair. It would be best therefore to wait.'

This was the determination with which they parted, Ruth to return to the Parsonage, Alice to be assisted by Marsham in dressing for her early dinner.

Ruth seemed strangely forgetful, strangely unmindful of the tacit falsehood which had pressed so heavily on her conscience on the day of the picnic at St Cuthbert's. But she was not really so. She was often very unhappy; the more so, because, even according to her own false views of duty, her motives were

Digitized by Google

not as pure as they had been. Ruth was becoming afraid of looking at her own conduct; afraid of acknowledging what she had been a party to. Every fresh step which Florence took, and every new light which was thrown upon Justine's character, told against them. Ruth said to Alice that it was only *possible* Justine might be gone with Mrs De Lacy, but she had no doubt of the fact herself. She implied also that Miss Merton's testimony was not fully to be credited, but she knew that it was supported by Mrs Carter, and probably by Mary Vernon. Still Ruth's cleverness came to her aid; and crushing the pang which accompanied the recollection of her deceit to her mother, by persuading herself that all would be well when she was able to acknowledge it, she carried on her plausible arguments till she really fancied herself convinced that, to use her old favourite phrase, she was acting for the best. Ruth's self-deception was great, and her mode of self-examination did not enable her to discover what she was really doing. The past was really past to her. Because it was beyond recall, she was apt to forget that it was not therefore beyond repentance. We travel away from our actions, and because we do not still see them, think that they have ceased to be. Alas! for us, if we do not awaken to a sense of the truth, until we are brought face to face again with our own lives before the judgment-seat of God.

All this time Ruth was exercising an influence which she little suspected.

Madeline's earnestness was not entirely thrown away upon Alice. She had to bear hours of pain, and watchfulness, and solitude; and in those hours she had leisure for thought. She knew that she had been saved from a great peril, and she was not unthankful for the mercy; and at times she began to ponder very seriously upon the uncertainty of life, the danger of procrastination, and the peace, and hope, and comfort which Madeline seemed to find in religion. 'Almost she was persuaded to be a Christian;' a Christian, that is, in the inward devotion of the heart, as well as in that real and solemn sense in which all are Christians who have been admitted into covenant with God by baptism. But there was a stumbling-block in her way. Alice gave a true character of herself when she said that she was no hypocrite. She might be indifferent, and take the ordinances of religion as things of course, but she could not bring herself, after what had passed, to make any peculiar profession of sincerity, unless she intended to act

Digitized by Google

up to it. She had deceived Lady Catharine with regard to her acquaintance with Florence. She could not go to be confirmed with a clear conscience, unless this fault was acknowledged. But the acknowledgment would bring to light all which Ruth still thought fit to keep secret, and therefore it could not be made. Alice was in a measure relieved when she came to this decision. It set the question of her confirmation nearly at rest. June was passing on rapidly; day after day went by, and nothing was heard either of Florence or Justine. Alice said to Madeline that there were reasons why she could not be confirmed; that she had made up her mind not to be; to Ruth she said nothing, because the subject was disagreeable to both; to Mr Clifford she was even more reserved than before; to Lady Catharine she was coldly acquiescent; and in her own heart she was wretched.

This state of things lasted for nearly a fortnight. During that time Alice made considerable progress towards recovery, and was allowed to go out of doors. She moved with difficulty, and was soon tired, but the change was pleasant to her; and if she had been happy in her mind, she might have begun to look upon her position in life with greater satisfaction. Lady Catharine's attention was unceasing; she was at Alice's call at any hour, and on any occasion. Nothing appeared a trouble; no request was considered inconvenient. Illness destroyed the formality of a strict household; and as Alice could not offend against laws which she was not now required to keep, Lady Catharine's genuine kindness of heart had its full scope.

Alice was touched by this unselfish affection. It would probably have gone far in breaking down the barriers of reserve between herself and Lady Catharine, if there had been no circumstances to throw a restraint over all which she herself did and said. The thoughts which were working in her breast, the longings for a stricter, holier life, the repentance for past negligences, would have been welcomed as the sunshine of life, but they were never known. And Lady Catharine pursued her daily course of unremitting, affectionate watchfulness, burdened with the secret dread that all the mercy which had been shown to Alice was unacknowledged—that her heart was insensible to religion, and that if death were then to meet her, it would find her unprepared, unrepentant, without faith in her Saviour, without a wish or thought for confirmation, without any desire for that

Digitized by Google

chief support of a Christian in life or death—the inestimable gift of God in the Holy Communion.

Persons who saw her said that Lady Catharine looked harassed, and was grown more melancholy than ever. No wonder. Anxiety for Alice was corroding all the enjoyment of her life.

CHAPTER LVIII.

'IT is growing late, Alice, my dear,' said Lady Catharine, as Ruth and Madeline were preparing to draw Alice again in her chair, round the garden, one foggy afternoon. 'Are you not tired? You have been out a long time.'

'A little while longer, if you please,' said Alice, entreatingly. 'I don't feel very tired, and it is extremely pleasant.'

'You ought not to be at all tired, my love; you have not had much to make you so. Mr Nichols says you ought to improve faster.'

'I am a great deal better. I shall be able to walk alone before very long,' replied Alice.

'I hope before the confirmation,' Madeline was going to say; but she checked herself.

Lady Catharine looked unhappy, and walked aside a few paces; then returning, she told Alice that she was going into the village for a little while, and that when she came back it would be quite time for her to go in.

The conversation did not proceed very freely even when Lady Catharine was gone; for the confirmation was now a forbidden subject, and the allusion to it was painful to them all. At another time it would have afforded a fertile subject for discussion. Alice was interested in many of the village girls who were going to be confirmed; but she did not choose to make inquiries about them. The restraint was destroying the pleasure of their being together, and when Alice said she would go in, no one objected. Marsham, Alice's constant attendant, was not in the house, and whilst waiting for her to assist in helping Alice up-stairs, and taking off her walking-dress, they all sat by the open window in the drawing-room. Alice did not consider whether it was prudent or not, and Ruth and Madeline had never yet learned the lessons of caution which sad experi-

Digitized by Google

ence of illness alone can give. The cold air blew pleasantly upon them, and when Ruth said that they were sitting in a draught, Alice declared it was very agreeable. Lady Catharine returned, went into the garden, and heard that Miss Lennox was gone in. This sounded very prudent, and Lady Catharine was satisfied, and went away again to attend to some other duties. Marsham also came home, and supposing that Alice was safely in her room, as she was not in the garden, sat down to tea, and did not think of going to her till the bell rang.

By the time the striking of the clock reminded Ruth that they must go back to the Parsonage Alice was chilly and uncomfortable, and more inclined to wish for a fire than to delight in a cool breeze.

When Alice went to bed her limbs were aching; she had a violent pain in her chest, and considerable fever. Lady Catharine was uneasy, and Marsham angry. Alice was generally considered strong; but no constitution, as Marsham emphatically declared, can stand sitting in a draught. She was not at all better the next morning. Orders were given that she should be kept in bed, and she had no wish to rebel; only she wished for society, and asked many times for Madeline and Ruth. They were later in their visit this day than usual. Lady Catharine told Alice that Mr Clifford was gone to see his sister-in-law. Mrs Clifford was not very well, and Ruth and Madeline did not like to leave her. The information was very disappointing to Alice; and if she had ever doubted the truth of anything spoken at the Parsonage, she could have doubted this. Mrs Clifford could not want them both; so unselfish as she was, surely she could spare one of them for an hour! Alice asked again and again whether anything or any person had come from the Parsonage, and fretted hereself into an increased fever at the continual answer in the negative. At length she did learn something; one of the housemaids, when Marsham was absent, told her that Mr Clifford had called that morning very early, immediately after breakfast. She heard him say that he was sorry he was obliged to go to Mrs Mordaunt's. He had a long talk with Lady Catharine for nearly an hour—and some one from the Parsonage had brought word in the course of the day that Mrs Clifford and the young ladies had seemed very much worried after the letters came in. The curiosity of Alice—a curiosity not unmingled with fear—was excited to the highest pitch by this information. It was told her

Digitized by Google

shortly, and when the servant was gone she had no one of whom she could venture to ask questions. Marsham was more strict and particular than even Lady Catharine herself; and to all Alice's inquiries as to news from the Parsonage, replied she must keep herself quiet, or she would be dreadfully ill. Lady Catharine came in and out of the room very frequently; but her face was not to be read, though her manner was altered; and sometimes she stood and looked fixedly at Alice for a few moments, and in her deep, sorrowful voice, asked how she was; but she did not offer to read to her, and she did not sit by the bed working. The spirit of restlessness and disquietude seemed to possess her. Alice bore with this uncertainty the greater part of the day; but every hour increased her uneasiness. Letters, she thought, could only mean letters from France, probably containing some unpleasant news from Florence. Lady Catharine's strange silence, she was sure, was caused by something on her mind, and it must be something about her. Mr Clifford must have heard from Ruth how they had been acting; he must have called in the morning to speak to Lady Catharine about it. Alice had nothing to distract her mind from these conjectures, except the pain in her head and the oppression on her chest, which began rapidly to increase. The measures which were taken to relieve this were a little occupation to her; but she could not sleep, and her inquiries for Ruth became more and more urgent. She was always impatient, and illness only increased the feeling; and at length she summoned courage to ask Lady Catharine if anything was the matter. Lady Catharine's cold answer was, 'Nothing that I can talk to you about now, my dear,' and Alice's suspicions became a certainty. She mentioned Ruth's name, and Lady Catharine's face was ominous of evil. Ruth might possibly come in the evening, she said; but Alice must rest contented without her. Alice could bear it no longer, and in her agitation she forgot all prudence, and entreated that Ruth might come to her, if it were only for half an hour. She could not be happy; she could not possibly sleep till she had seen her. Lady Catharine gave no promise; but at length went away, leaving Alice with a hope that she was about to send a message to bring Ruth to the Manor.

Alice became quieter then; she was really ill, and unequal to much thought; and in the expectation of Ruth's arrival, her mind sank into that passive state which helplessness and weakness will sometimes bring.

Digitized by Google

As the time drew near when Ruth might come, her excitement revived again. She listened to every sound, fancying that she heard footsteps and voices when there were none; and made Marsham prop up her pillows and help her to sit upright. She was so eager, and her cheek was so flushed, that Marsham's injunctions to keep quiet were repeated oftener than ever. All Alice would say was, 'I am quiet; I only want to see Ruth. Is not that her step in the passage? Pray, Marsham, look.' Marsham soon gave up looking; for Ruth did not come, though a much longer time elapsed than would have brought her from the Parsonage. When Alice heard at last that Miss Clifford was in the house, but that Lady Catharine was talking to her in the breakfast-room, she burst into tears, declaring that they were all cruel—Ruth worse than any; and Marsham went away, thinking that Lady Catharine's authority was necessary. Alice's uncertainty lasted for about ten minutes longer; at the expiration of that time Ruth tapped gently at the door. She came into the room with her bonnet on and her veil down, and Alice could not clearly see her face. She went up to the bed. Alice flung her arm round her and exclaimed—

'Thank you; now it will all be well. Tell me the whole, Ruth, at once.'

Ruth sat down without uttering a word.

'Take off your bonnet—I can't see you—the room is dark—I want to look at you,' said Alice.

Ruth untied the strings of her bonnet.

'But the veil—I can't see you now; please take it all off. Ruth, dear, how strange you are!'

Ruth put up her hand, but it shook violently.

Alice touched her. 'Ruth, pray speak—what is it?'

Ruth slowly took off her bonnet, turning aside her head as she did so, and said, in a constrained voice, 'Alice, are you better?'

'Yes; but Ruth, don't speak so; you frighten me. Why won't you look at me?'

Ruth looked, and tried to force a smile. Her cheek was quite colourless, except where there was a red dark line under the eye, which, with the swollen eyelids, marked that she had been crying.

Alice became calmer in manner as she was more frightened. 'Ruth,' she said, 'you have had bad news?'

Digitized by Google

'We are all well at the Parsonage,' was Ruth's answer. 'We think about you very much.'

'But you are altered; I can't understand you. You have had news, I am sure you have, from Florence or Justine.'

Alice was looking steadily at Ruth as she spoke; she saw her countenance change. 'It is about them; there is something. O Ruth! tell me.'

'Alice, you must be quiet; Lady Catharine will never forgive me.'

'But I must know;' and Alice's eyes flashed, and she grasped Ruth's hand with an unnatural strength. 'Ruth, if you do not tell me I shall go wild. What have you heard? Where is Justine?'

Ruth shuddered. She bent her head upon the pillow, and said, 'Justine is dead!'

The next instant the bell in Alice's room rang violently; she had fainted.

CHAPTER LIX.

WHEN Ruth was recalled to Alice's chamber, she met Lady Catharine at the door. Her manner was gravely upbraiding. 'I trusted you, Ruth,' she said, 'because I thought you had common sense and self-command; but you have been most imprudent. Alice, however, will not be satisfied without seeing you again, and you must go to her. Remember her life even may depend upon your caution.' She moved aside, and Ruth passed her in silence.

Alice now lay quite still, and spoke feebly; but there was a spot of crimson on her cheek, and her eyes were dull and glassy. 'Tell me about it,' she said, as Ruth sat down by her side; 'it is true, Lady Catharine says so: I thought it was a dream. Was it sudden? tell me at once—quickly.'

'Stop, pray be patient, dear Alice; they will think it is my fault again if you are worse.'

'But was it illness?—only tell me.'

'No, not illness; pray don't look so eager,' said Ruth, in a broken voice, whilst her breath came and went rapidly. 'She was not ill;—they were in Paris;—it was an accident.' She

Digitized by Google

paused for a moment, and then added, 'She was thrown out of a carriage and'——

'Hurt, was she? Did she live long? How terrible!' and Alice put her hands before her eyes.

'No, no; she did not live. Alice, it is so very dreadful; she was killed, killed on the spot.'

Ruth sank back in her chair, and tears came to her relief. Alice lay without speech or movement, except that her hands fell powerless by her side. Scarcely a fortnight before, and she too had stood upon the brink of a sudden destruction. Justine had been taken, she had been left. The case might have been reversed, and then—Alice could not face the thought which presented itself. She turned to Ruth, and said, hastily, 'I should be glad to hear more. Is there more to know?'

'Yes, much; a great deal; the worst of all,' exclaimed Ruth, bitterly. 'O Alice! we have done very wrong; I have at least; and yet I thought I was to make you good, to lead you all right.'

'But about'—— Alice hesitated to pronounce Justine's name.

'Yes, about her; I know you must want to hear. I was going to bring the letter, but they said I had better not. It was not meant for you to know, if they could have kept it from you. Florence writes very miserably. Justine, she says, was very trying on the journey, full of her own fancies, and they were quite dependent on her, because of her knowledge of the language and the country. Mrs De Lacy did not mind at first, but after they had been in Paris a few days, there came a letter from that Miss Merton we met at St Cuthbert's. She had seen Justine with them in London before they set off, and recognised her. She thought Mrs De Lacy must have been deceived by her, and wrote to tell her about it. Mrs De Lacy was extremely angry, and inquired what Florence knew of the matter; and from what Florence says, she must have made some excuse which satisfied her aunt for the time, and at last she consented to let Justine remain longer.' Here Ruth again paused, as if to recover strength for the continuation of her story.

Alice whispered, 'Go on. Florence is beyond my comprehension.'

'And so she is beyond mine,' exclaimed Ruth; 'for—Alice, this is to me the very worst part of all—Miss Merton's story is quite true. I have heard this morning from Mary Vernon,

Digitized by Google

telling me the whole, and more even than you heard. Mary says she writes to me because she is afraid when Florence is at Sheldon I may be drawn in to have something to do with her concerns. It was not merely at Mrs Darnley's that Justine behaved ill; but ever since we left Mrs Carter's, and I am afraid Florence encouraged her at last, because she owns herself to me that she was forced to assist her in seeing those friends in Paris whom Miss Merton spoke of; those, I mean, who were the cause of her leaving the Darnleys. Florence says she knows it was not right, but Justine was so very wilful, nothing could stop her when she had set her mind upon anything; and, if Florence refused, she would be moody, and not speak for hours; and then Mrs De Lacy was cross, and everything went amiss; so Florence was obliged to humour her.' Ruth hurried the last words, and broke off with the exclamation—'Alice! if it had not been for me she might never have gone; yet I did not mean any harm.'

'You were not like me,' said Alice; 'you did not deceive because you were afraid.'

Ruth shrank from the implied superiority, and answered quickly, 'Don't compare, Alice; I cannot bear it; there is more to be told, but you seem so tired you had better not hear any more.'

'Go on, don't wait; let me hear all before any one comes,' replied Alice, though she looked already exhausted with the fatigue and excitement of listening.

'They told me you were extremely ill,' said Ruth, her thoughts now for the first time fully directed to Alice's state.

'Yes, very ill. Go on,' whispered Alice.

Ruth regarded her in fear. 'You are very ill,' she said, a dawning of the truth stealing upon her mind.

'Go on; give me a little water; I shall not be able to hear much, but go on.'

Ruth gave her the water with a trembling hand. It required some moments to collect again her scattered thoughts, and her voice was nearly choked as she said, 'I told you about Mrs De Lacy, that she agreed to allow Justine to stay, partly, I am afraid, because Florence assured her that I knew her and had a good opinion of her, and had thought it best to keep her secret. Florence was going then to let me know all about it; at least so she says; but I can't quite tell what she would have done: she is very strange. But I think she sees she was wrong

Digitized by Google

now; Justine's last act'—— Ruth could hardly finish the sentence; it was indeed awful to think of the tremendous change which had overtaken the unhappy girl, in the very midst of her course of deception and wilfulness. 'She went on, as I told you, in the same way in Paris as she did in England,' continued Ruth, recovering herself. 'The same friends were there whom she visited when she was at the Darnleys'. That was the one great reason for her wishing to be abroad, it seems. Mrs De Lacy and Florence were going to Versailles one day; she was left with Agnes, and she promised not to go out anywhere; she told Florence that she would not; but she did go just the same, and met some of these people, and they persuaded her to take a drive with them, and it was then the accident happened; the horses ran away, and the carriage was upset. The friends who were with her were saved, only very much bruised.' Ruth burst into tears again.

'Miss Clifford,' said Marsham, coming into the room. 'My lady has been scolding me for letting you stay; she thought you had done mischief enough before for one day.'

Alice did indeed appear much worse, but she made Ruth stoop down to listen, and said, in a low voice, 'Ruth, I shall tell all to Lady Catharine if I can; then I shall be happy.'

'Happy! Ah! Alice, that can never be for me.'

'Yes, Ruth, dear, you will be when you have told; and I shall say my prayers better. There was always something in my way till now. Tell Madeline, if I can't;—she wanted me to think about being confirmed, I could not whilst there was a secret;—that was the reason, please tell her.'

CHAPTER LX.

IT was drawing towards the close of the evening; the lingering hues of sunset were fast fading away, and twilight was throwing its cheerless gloom over the dreariness of a sick chamber. The curtains of the window were undrawn, and a cold light fell upon the bed on which Alice lay; her lips parched, her complexion thick, sallow, and colourless; her eyes shut, and her breathing at times faint, irregular, and scarcely to be heard, and again struggling as with convulsive efforts.

Digitized by Google

The Manor was always silent, even amidst the occupation and interest of the summer noonday; now, every sound had ceased. Neither the distant rumbling of a cart moving slowly through the village, nor the working of the blacksmith's forge, nor the shouts of the children on the green, broke the perfect stillness which reigned around. As the deepening shadows stole over the face of nature, the shadow of a coming grief stole over the weary heart of Lady Catharine Hyde. She was watching by the bed; Marsham stood near, occasionally laying her hand gently upon Alice's pulse. Lady Catharine asked no questions; she sat without leaning back in her chair, gazing steadily, and apparently unmoved, upon Alice's changed features. Presently she said, 'Marsham, it is possible Mr Clifford may be at home to-night—I should wish to know.'

Marsham was going to leave the room, but returning, inquired whether Lady Catharine would write, or whether she would prefer sending a message.

'I will write; bring me my desk,' and Lady Catharine wrote a few words without trembling or agitation.

The note was sealed and directed; again Marsham was going, but she had read her mistress's countenance well. She stopped and said, 'Would your ladyship lie down a little before Mr Clifford comes?'

Lady Catharine shook her head.

'If I might order you something, my lady,' continued Marsham, 'you have had nothing all day.'

'No, no; let me only see Mr Clifford, if possible.'

Marsham looked at Alice once more. 'Miss Lennox is sleeping, my lady,' she observed, in a low tone. 'Mr Nichols said sleep would do her more good than anything.'

Lady Catharine smiled so sadly that Marsham's respect could no longer be a restraint upon her sympathy. 'O my lady!' she exclaimed, 'if you would only take a little rest! It must be bad for you any way; and if Miss Alice should be worse'——

'She will be worse, Marsham.'

'Not for certain,' said Marsham, firmly.

'I have no hope—she will die,' escaped from Lady Catharine, in a faint whisper of misery.

Marsham suffered the words to pass without contradiction.

Lady Catharine waited for an instant, and then she added, 'Let my note be sent directly; you need not return yourself;

Digitized by Google

and remember, I wish to have nothing said that may give alarm.'

Marsham departed, and Lady Catharine moved to the other end of the room to fetch a book. When she came back, Alice's position was altered; her head was buried in her pillow so as completely to hide her face, and the position of her hands was different, yet still she seemed to sleep. Lady Catharine noticed the change, but satisfied herself that she was not really disturbed, and sat down again by the bedside. The long minutes passed on, and Lady Catharine read, or tried to read, and at length hearing Marsham's tread in the passage, she looked once more at Alice, and, going to the door, opened it very softly, and, closing it as noiselessly, went out.

As the almost inaudible sound told that the room was empty, a groan of anguish burst from Alice. She threw back the coverlid, and clasped her hands, as if in deep suffering, and raising her head with difficulty, gazed for a moment round the room, and then, gasping for breath, sank back upon her pillow with an expression of utter hopelessness. When Lady Catharine returned her face was again hidden.

Nearly a quarter of an hour afterwards Marsham brought an answer from the Parsonage. It had been delayed, as Mrs Clifford was not in the house when Lady Catharine's note arrived. Mr Clifford was certainly not expected for two or three days. Lady Catharine threw herself back in her chair, the image of utter despondency, but, recovering herself instantly, said, 'Marsham, you were right; I must try to rest.' She bent over Alice and kissed her, and without another observation, walked slowly out of the room.

Silence once more settled upon the household, a silence which reigned for several hours. Alice was apparently in a state of torpor; it was not sleep, for her eyes opened from time to time, and she asked occasionally for water, but she did not reply to any questions, and Marsham could not determine how much or how little consciousness she retained.

And was Alice unconscious? Is the prisoner unconscious who ponders the sentence of his execution? or the traveller who finds himself suddenly upon the brink of a precipice from which there is no escape?

Die! Young, careless, unstable; her imagination filled with visions for the future of a long life; her heart just opening to the claims of human affection; the past remembered but as a

Digitized by Google

confused dream, of which no account could be given. Die! Could that faint, dread whisper be true?

What passed in these dreary hours of darkness—the conflict between self-upbraiding thoughts and fruitless wishes—it were hard indeed to tell. It was a fearful night for Alice; a night never to be forgotten. She who had so long doubted and wavered, who had gone one step in the right way, and then turned back to take many in the wrong, was now at length suddenly brought to a decision, happy only in that the decision was not entirely the result of fear; that it had in a measure been resolved upon before the thought of death made her tremble at the prospect of judgment.

Morning dawned, sufficiently to cast a pale light over the chamber, and destroy the little remaining brilliancy of the expiring lamp. Worn with fever of body and anguish of mind, Alice at last fell into an uneasy slumber. She woke again restless and unrefreshed. Marsham's chair was empty, the curtains were drawn at the side of the bed and across the window, and the room was still gloomy in the twilight. A stifled sob fell upon her ear—the moan of a bitter grief, and then the words of a broken, fervent, almost a despairing prayer—a prayer for her. It asked—there was agony in the tone, and the intensity of a mother's love in the expression—for mercy upon one weak and erring, yet precious beyond the utterance of words. It asked for repentance—for time that might be dedicated to self-examination and abasement; for faith in a Saviour's atonement; for the spirit which should devote to His service the few lingering hours of a short life. And it betrayed feelings which would never have been spoken to a human ear. In the presence of Him who alone knew the secrets of her lonely life, Lady Catharine could tell, with the simple confidence of a child, of the love which had sprung up in her early days, and was strengthened in her advancing youth, and cherished and nurtured amidst the chilling temptations of the world, and at length appeared to sleep in a parent's grave, only to be re-awakened with a more anxious interest in the life of her child.

A mother's prayer might have been different—it could not have been more earnest. It was ended, but Lady Catharine still knelt. There was but one position now for her—one attitude to speak when words had failed—one posture to give a silent voice to the all-absorbing thought—that of Alice's safety, not in life, but in death. She stood at length once more bending

Digitized by Google

over Alice; and Alice raised her eyes blinded with tears. Lady Catharine spoke to her tenderly. Alice held her hand and tried to answer; it was but a whisper. Lady Catharine stooped to listen, and then came a burst of agonised feeling, and the awful question—

'Must I die?'

Lady Catharine started with horror at the echo of her own thoughts. 'Die! Alice, my child, my treasure! who says it?'

'You think I must; you love me, and you cannot deceive me.'

Lady Catharine answered quietly, 'Life and death are in the hands of God.'

'But will He take me?—is it certain?—do you know it must be?' repeated Alice; and still she held Lady Catharine's hand, and fixed her large, eager eyes upon her face, seeking to read her sentence there.

Lady Catharine sat down by the bed-side, for her limbs trembled; but still she spoke soothingly. 'Alice, my love, you are very ill. We cannot tell what it may please God to ordain; we can but resign ourselves to His will.'

Alice turned away her head; she was answered.

'Shall I pray for you, Alice?' asked Lady Catharine.

Alice looked at her once more with a quieter, more settled expression. 'Kiss me,' she said, 'kiss me—again, again—forgive me—pray Him to forgive me. I have done such bad things; I would do better, if I might live—I would try. Don't go,' she added, as Lady Catharine gently withdrew her hand to wipe away her tears; 'I would please you and love you; I would be like dear mamma, if I might only live.'

'My own Alice, there is but one way of pleasing me now—trusting all to God.'

'But I have done very wrong,' said Alice, her voice growing eager, and her eyes flashing with excitement, as a crowd of confused recollections presented themselves to her mind. 'There is so much to tell, I can't remember it. If Ruth were here, she would help. Send for Ruth—please send for her.'

'Ruth has told me some things, my love; she is gone home.'

'But about Florence—that was it—Florence and Justine. Justine is dead, they said—is she dead? My head aches so very much?' Alice sank half-exhausted upon her pillow.

'You must sleep again, my love,' began Lady Catharine, but Alice roused herself instantly.

Digitized by Google

'Sleep!—never. I must tell.'

'No, indeed, my child, you must not tell. Whatever the wrong may be, it is forgiven.'

'Forgiven! before you have heard?'

'All—everything. But I have heard much already. O Alice! my precious child! may you but find the same forgiveness with God;' and Lady Catharine sank upon her knees in an agony of grief.

'I should like you to pray for me,' whispered Alice.

Lady Catharine recovered her self-command almost instantaneously. Her voice never faltered as she read the prayer for pardon in the Visitation of the Sick, and when she rose up the expression of her face was not only peaceful but thankful. Alice, too, seemed comforted. She pointed to a chair for Lady Catharine to sit down, and said—

'You are quite sure that you forgive?'

'Yes, indeed, my love. Do not think of me; think only of yourself.'

'But I have been wrong,' continued Alice, 'such a long time—always.'

'And I have loved you so long,' said Lady Catharine.

'Yes, because of dear mamma, not for myself; but I would do everything, and I would love you dearly;' and she tried to raise herself in her bed and throw her arms round Lady Catharine's neck.

'For your mother's sake I loved you first, my own Alice,' said Lady Catharine; 'but since for yourself.'

'No, not for me, not for me,' pursued Alice; 'but I would do better. Would it be wrong to pray?' she added, in an eager, tremulous voice.

'Pray for what?'

'That I might get well only for one week—that I might do every little tiny thing to please you; and then I would come back and die.'

Lady Catharine could not answer.

'I must die, I know,' continued Alice. 'If I were forgiven, I should like it—not to do wrong any more.'

'My love, we must not doubt of forgiveness when we are really sorry.'

'Yes, I know; but I have been so often sorry, and I have gone wrong again. Yet now I think I am in earnest; I think He knows it.'

Digitized by Google

'Doubtless God knows it and accepts it,' said Lady Catharine. 'Alice, we shall yet part in peace.'

'When I die,' said Alice; and she slightly shuddered. 'Will it be very soon?' she added, in a tone of deep awe.

'Very soon, it may be; and we must think it cannot be too soon if it is God's will.'

'And if I am forgiven,' said Alice; 'if I am quite sure of that; would Mr Clifford say he was sure?'

'We must trust to the word of God, my love. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." That is what St John says; and again, St Paul tells us that "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."'

'I wish Mr Clifford was here; I wish he could say it to me,' continued Alice. 'He thought me so wicked; would he believe now that I am sorry?'

'Yes, indeed; how could he doubt it?'

'But will you tell him? Perhaps I shall be'—— she stopped; 'if it is very soon, you know he might not be here; but I should like him to be told. I loved him very much when he talked that night. And Mrs Clifford, and Madeline, and Ruth, will they come and see me? I should like to say good-bye, if I must—are you sure?—must I really die?'

Alice's terror seemed returning, and Lady Catharine, controlling her own anguish, kissed her again and again, and, raising her gently, gave her water to moisten her parched lips. Distressing memories seemed crowding upon Alice's mind.

'There is so much,' she murmured, 'it comes altogether; so long ago it happened. At the White House I deceived mamma; one day I told a story; Benson let me do wrong things; I can't recollect—won't you help me?' and her glassy eyes were raised entreatingly and helplessly to Lady Catharine.

'You are too weak to remember all, my dear child; but your Saviour is most merciful; He will never turn away. He loves you very dearly.'

'I have been wicked—worse than any one,' said Alice.

'Yet all the time think how He loved you. When you were left an orphan, how He took care of you; and how He has blessed you ever since, though you were wilful and careless; and now, O Alice! there is no blessing like repentance, for it will bring you to rest in Paradise.'

'Rest,' repeated Alice, very faintly. Lady Catharine, as she bent down, caught the words, 'My mother.'

Digitized by Google

'Yes, Alice, my precious child, rest with her; with the spirits of the pure like her; rest in the company of angels; rest, above all, with God.'

And as the last words were uttered, Alice's head sank upon the pillow and her eyes closed; whether in sleep or the torpor of approaching death, Lady Catharine could not tell.

CHAPTER LXI.

WHEN Ruth left Alice, she went back to the Parsonage, to shut herself up in her own room. Alice's parting words were the one overflowing drop in her cup of bitterness: —'She wanted me to think about being confirmed, and I could not—that was the reason.'

And this was the end of all her efforts to obtain influence! Florence encouraged in a course of deception; Agnes De Lacy confided to the teaching of one who could only lead her astray; Justine's evil schemes furthered till they were terminated suddenly and awfully; and Alice, her companion, her friend, who from childhood had looked up to her and loved her, kept back from the solemn ordinances of the Church, and about, it might be, to enter upon the last struggle of life and death with a burdened conscience, and unsupported by the chief blessing which God has provided for His people. Ruth might well tremble when she thought of these things. Her own share in them was indeed exaggerated considerably by the agitation of the moment. Florence would have been frivolous and obstinate, Justine deceitful, and Alice unstable, whether Ruth had concerned herself with them or not; but the part which she had taken, though unconsciously, in fostering the original evil in their characters, could not be hidden.

Ruth was not wilfully insincere. One wrong principle had blinded her; but she was still bent upon serving God truly. The startling consequences of her errors forced her to a closer self-examination, and something of the truth began to dawn upon her. The deceit practised towards her mother had frightened her at first; but she had stifled self-reproach, and passed it over, if not forgotten it. Now it came again. One glaring offence will often, as if by a special permission of Pro-

Digitized by Google

vidence, open our eyes to many secret ones. Ruth now reviewed her conduct step by step. At one moment she was inclined to excuse herself, and especially to compare herself with Madeline, and ask whether her sister, under similar temptations, would not have acted in the same way. But a sincere purpose must, by God's blessing, enlighten by degrees both the conscience and the judgment; and Ruth soon acknowledged that Madeline had in fact been placed under precisely the same circumstances as herself at the beginning, but that an act of strict adherence to duty—an act which many might have termed scrupulousness—had kept her from every succeeding difficulty. If Madeline had entered Mrs De Lacy's house instead of carefully consulting what she believed to be her mother's wishes, she might have been involved in the same snare as Ruth. We excuse our faults because of the strength of our temptation, and forget that we have brought the temptation upon ourselves. The Bible tells us that God never tempts us above that we are able to bear.

All this and much more Ruth saw, and bitter indeed was her sorrow. Conversation with her mother was her only comfort. Mrs Clifford did not so much try to subdue her anguish by reasoning, as to soften it by sympathy. She encouraged her to repeat again all the minute events of the last few weeks, not by way of confession but relief. She could understand, she said, how easily Ruth might have been led on, without any deliberate intention of doing wrong — acting upon expediency instead of principle; for it was the frequent mistake of many older and wiser persons; and as Ruth listened to her mother, and her heavy heart grew lighter, she was not less penitent for her faults, or less sorrowful about Alice, but she was freed from the lonely feeling which oppresses us when first we are conscious of having fallen into serious errors; and her perception of right and wrong became clearer and deeper. When we exaggerate our faults we are not always truly humble. At the root of the most intense outward expression of sorrow there is often a belief that we are not quite as bad as we say, and an idea, unacknowledged, that our grief is in some measure an expiation for our offence. Truth is as valuable in repentance as in all other cases: for, though our feelings may be less keen, they will certainly be more lasting when they are just as well as sincere.

Mr Clifford returned home the day but one after Alice became so much worse. The accounts from the Manor were

Digitized by Google

then rather more favourable. The dangerous symptoms had not increased, much to the surprise of Alice's medical attendant; though as yet little real hope could be given. Alice required sleep, but it was bestowed only at short intervals, and quietness being deemed indispensable, no one was allowed to see her except Lady Catharine.

Ruth became extremely anxious, almost more so now that there was hope, than when there had appeared to be none. She would willingly have been backwards and forwards between the Parsonage and the Manor all day, and Mr Clifford found it scarcely possible to calm her uneasiness. Her exaggerated views of her own conduct revived, and because Alice had met with an accident at the picnic, to which she had persuaded her to go, she almost began to fancy that she was the cause of her present illness.

Mr Clifford tried to engage her attention by talking with her upon all that had occurred. Ruth could speak and think of nothing else. Sometimes it seemed quite plain to her when and how she had failed in her duty; at other times she was confirmed in the belief that she had never intended to do wrong, and, on the contrary, had generally set herself to do good. How could evil consequences follow upon good intentions?

Ruth's ideas were made clearer upon this point when she sat with her father and mother the same evening in the arbour, at the extremity of the green walk, where in long past years—the years of her happy innocent childhood, she had gained some of her first notions of religious truth. She had by that time told all; and not only all that she had done, but all that she had wished to do; all her motives and feelings, so far as she could discover them. 'I cannot find out,' she said, 'how I managed to be so mistaken. I can see that I was, but I fancied myself right at the time. I hope I did not do it all wilfully.'

'We are apt to deceive ourselves a little upon such subjects, my dear Ruth,' replied Mr Clifford. 'Wilful sins are not merely those which we deliberately plan, but they are also those which we encourage day by day in the temper of our minds. A man is secretly ambitious; to gratify his ambition he commits an injustice, without perceiving that it is an injustice. Then he opens his eyes and says, "I am not guilty, because I did not mean to be unjust." Granted; he is not guilty of wilful injustice, but he is guilty of wilful ambition. It is the same with selfishness, vanity—all sins, in fact. Any one false

Digitized by Google

principle allowed to take root, and then acted upon, is a wilful offence.'

The tears rose to Ruth's eyes.

'Poor child!' said Mrs Clifford, 'she is very unhappy; we must not be hard upon her.'

'Ruth knows I would not for the world be hard upon her, or upon any one,' replied Mr Clifford. 'It is because there is too much in one's own heart of the same self-deception that one is apt to speak strongly against it. I have seen it fatally marring what might otherwise have been most superior characters; a secret, gentle selfishness, or vanity, or love of self-indulgence; or, as it is in Ruth's case—Ruth, my child, you will not be vexed with your father and mother for reminding you of a disposition which they saw before you really began to discriminate right from wrong—a desire to be first, to rule and govern other minds; I have seen these little faults—or, as they are often called, foibles, eating away the seeds of even exalted virtues, and involving others in suffering for years, and yet the individuals themselves, firm in good intentions, and professing to act from high, even religious motives.'

'O papa!' exclaimed Ruth, and she looked at him with surprise amounting to alarm.

'It is a very stern doctrine,' said Mr Clifford, 'but I am afraid it may be a true one; and if we consider a little more closely, we shall see that the principle is fully carried out in the Bible. Saul was secretly irreverent and wilful. He was told utterly to destroy Amalek; the people took of the spoils, the sheep and oxen, not for their own pleasure, but for the service of God. Saul permitted it; he did not see that the act was disobedience. The answer of Samuel to his excuse is a warning to us all, when we are inclined to deviate from the strict line of right with what seems to ourselves a good intention: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams."'

'But, papa,' said Ruth, 'if we do not see that we are wrong, how can we be responsible?'

'Because, my dear child, we ought to see it. We have a perfect example and a perfect law given us in the Bible, and we may follow it if we will. It is no excuse for a drunkard, who never reads his Bible, to say that he does not know that drunkenness is a sin.

'But such a sin as that is what every one perceives to be wicked at once,' observed Ruth.

Digitized by Google

'True; and it requires careful self-examination to detect sins of the heart—pride, vanity, selfishness, self-indulgence. Still, where is our excuse? Are we not told to examine ourselves?—to watch and pray lest we enter into temptation?'

'But—I do not mean to be perverse; mamma, you know that I do not,' began Ruth, turning to her mother.

'Your papa will not think so, dear child; only let us know what your difficulty is.'

'I have been wrong,' continued Ruth, colouring deeply; 'I have deceived—almost I have said what was not true. Papa, I would own it again and again; but it was not vanity which made me do it, nor selfishness; and I do not think exactly that it was pride. I used to examine myself; I really tried to prepare for confirmation; I should have been miserable to have neglected my prayers; or not to have read the Bible, and I was always wishing to get out of my perplexities if I could have seen the right way.'

'That is, if you could have made up your mind to give up your desire of influence,' said Mr Clifford.

'Yes, it might be; perhaps it was so,' said Ruth, considering; 'but it was influence for good which I wished for.'

'But influence is not in itself a legitimate object of desire, Ruth; there lies the error. Many weeks ago I warned you that it was not.'

Ruth looked as if she could not agree, but did not like to differ.

'The love of influence is ambition,' continued Mr Clifford; 'it is the love of power, and power we are expressly told "belongeth unto God."'

'But to do good, to make others good,' said Ruth; 'surely we are bound to attempt it.'

'To do right, certainly; to make others good, certainly not; and for one very evident reason—that it is a task entirely beyond us.'

Ruth repeated to herself, 'Not to make others good,' whilst pondering what the words could possibly mean.

'To try to act ourselves upon the minds of our fellow-creatures,' continued Mr Clifford, 'instead of simply doing what we are told, and trusting the effect to God, is as if Moses, when commanded to strike the rock in the desert, had begun to dig wells, and cut channels, hoping to bring water for the people by human skill. It is undertaking to do ourselves what God alone can do. The power to change the heart is His and His only.'

Digitized by Google

'Yes,' replied Ruth, 'of course; but God does give us power over each other.'

'Undoubtedly; that is, He vouchsafes to make use of us as instruments. But let us turn again to the Bible. Do you remember what the apostle says? "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; that no flesh should glory in His presence." The mighty things of the world are talents, eloquence, a determined will, powers of persuasion, rank, riches, beauty, grace of manner; and the weak things of the world are meekness, charity, patience, long-suffering, self-denial. These we may desire as we will; we cannot strive for them too energetically; the others are glittering temptations, and in themselves powerless for good.'

'Ruth cannot quite go with you,' said Mrs Clifford; 'she does not see why the two are not compatible; why, for instance, a person may not be very clever, or very rich, and at the same time extremely good, and therefore blest with more extended means of influence; and why, therefore, it is not allowable to wish for talents or riches.'

'Because talents and riches are great snares,' replied Mr Clifford; 'and the very fact of desiring them shows that there is danger in our having them. Do you not see that if we could believe, what is really the case, that all power and all influence belong to God; and if we really desired the good of our fellow-creatures, and not the gratification of our own pride, we should be quite contented whether we had influence apparently (for all persons may have it really) or not? It is God who is working, not we. If He does not choose us as His instruments, it will make no difference; the good will be effected by some one, and as long as it is effected we must be satisfied.'

'Still,' said Ruth, 'it would be delightful to feel that one had been the means of doing great good. It has been one of my dreams from a child.'

'Then, my dearest Ruth, you may be assured that it is your peculiar temptation.'

'But no great deeds would be effected if people had not such dreams and longings,' replied Ruth.

'I grant it perfectly, and I do not say that they may not be turned to very great advantage; they may rouse energy and encourage perseverance; but I do say, and I would repeat it

Digitized by Google

most strongly, that they must always be a serious temptation. For remember, every good principle, carried to excess, becomes evil, and the higher the principle the more fatal when perverted.'

'But would such dreams be more dangerous than others?' asked Ruth.

'Yes, because the evil is infinitely more subtle. Remember, Ruth, we have seen that power,—all power,—most especially influence over the mind, is the work of the Spirit of God. A clever man talks, or writes, or preaches, and persons come to him, and say, How happy you must be! What infinite good you are effecting! No one thinks it right to remind him that the good is not his own. By degrees he begins to believe what he is so constantly told—he works even more diligently, but, unconsciously to himself, from a different motive. Still the same words are sounded in his ears. At length he dies; people lament him, and recount all the good he has done; he has left a name for posterity to honour. But he is dead; "after death comes the judgment." When that man is called to give an account of himself before God, do you think he will be accepted because he was eloquent, energetic, liberal in giving money and apt to advise, or even the instrument of turning many from sin to holiness?'

'One would almost imagine so,' said Ruth; 'that is, one cannot help fancying that such things must make a difference.'

'Think of St Paul,' said Mr Clifford, 'where he says, "Lest having preached to others, I myself should be a cast-away." It must be a fearful thing for such a man as I have been describing, for any person, indeed, who has trusted to the good which he appears to have effected, to discover, when repentance can be of no avail, that he has been all the time acting the part of Herod, who listened to the voice of the people proclaiming him a god, and perished miserably, because he gave not the True God the glory.'

'But the danger is not certain,' said Ruth.

'No, there is one hope of escape, and but one. When the traveller in the desert knows that the scorching Simoom is approaching, he throws himself upon the ground, and buries his face in the dust, and it passes, and leaves him uninjured; and when the scorching Simoom of human admiration is about to assail us, our safety must be the same—to lie prostrate before God closing our eyes, and stopping our ears, and uttering a

Digitized by Google

confession of unworthiness to Him, for every word of praise from man. Is this the temper of mind which suits with the desire of influence?'

Finding that Ruth was silent, Mr Clifford continued—

'I will tell you, my dear Ruth,' he said, 'what our actual position when we appear to be doing good is like. Last year we saw the enormous steam printing-press, by which Bibles can be printed at the rate of one in a minute. Do you remember noticing the boy who placed the blank sheet of paper in readiness for the engine to work upon?'

'Yes,' replied Ruth, 'perfectly.'

'Now if that boy had failed in his business, the work would have been stopped. But was it he who printed the Bible?'

Ruth smiled.

'The mighty power, if one may use a simile upon such a subject without irreverence,' continued Mr Clifford, 'was totally independent of him. The sheet of paper went in blank; it came out a message of mercy to millions. Suppose that, instead of simply attending to his duty, the boy had endeavoured himself to print the page?'

'He would have been crushed,' replied Ruth.

'And so shall we be crushed, my dear Ruth—crushed in our happiness upon earth, and crushed in our hopes of heaven, if we turn aside from the only true means of influence, fervent intercession, and a strict obedience to humble daily duties, and seek to make others good, instead of carefully striving to be good ourselves.'

Ruth put her hand within her father's, and said, whilst her lip quivered, and her eyes glistened—

'Papa, I think you are right; if I had thought so before, Alice'—— She stopped.

'My love, you will remember one way of doing good—the chief way, if we would but believe it, is open to us always. Alice is in the hands of a most merciful God; we may pray for her.'

Madeline seems to have been long forgotten. There are many like her in this world—passing unnoticed by man, yet very precious in the sight of God.

At the end of the little passage into which the few bed-chambers of the Parsonage opened, there was a very small room—dark, without a fire-place, and long used as a lumber closet. It had no attraction of any kind. The lattice-window faced a

Digitized by Google

wall, and only when looking in one direction, could a distant peep of the hills be discovered, which closed round the village of Laneton. Madeline had chosen this closet for her own; it had a charm for her. Perhaps it was the charm of independence and solitude; perhaps there was something in by-gone associations—the remembrance of that first prayer, the germ of unfading happiness, which had been offered in the midst of the turmoil and distraction of school, in the little dressing-room at Mrs Carter's house. The closet was known by the name of Madeline's hiding-place; and many were the laughs raised at her expense, for the ingenuity with which she had managed to pile up boxes, and chests, and stow away all the useless treasures of many years, and still leave room for a habitation, or, as Ruth called it, a settlement for herself. A little round table, and an old chair; a shelf to hold about half-a-dozen books; and the ledge of the window for any et ceteras,—these were all Madeline's accommodations for comfort. And they were all she needed. The half-hours spent in her hiding-place were seasons when earthly luxuries were forgotten—they were half-hours of that peace which the world can neither give nor take away.

Madeline was in her closet now; the lattice-window was open, and she was seated by it. Her face bore the traces of tears, for she was looking upon the sky and thinking of Alice. Before many days—possibly before many hours had gone by, the secrets of that invisible world, upon the outskirts of which she was gazing, might be revealed to her. What were those secrets? What would that state be upon which the friend with whom she had lived, played, talked, eaten and drank, and shared both sorrow and joy, would then enter? Where lay the home of the departed? What were their hopes and fears? What formed their happiness or their misery? And how could Alice bear the change? To go alone! unaided by human love; to begin a new existence, and that existence fixed—most blessed or most wretched for ever. Madeline trembled and grew pale. Another thought, a more terrible one, followed—a remembrance of Justine. Madeline's last recollection of her was the sound of her voice in the hall of Mrs Carter's house on the morning of the discovery of her fault. It was the last that she had seen or heard of her. How little she imagined then that it would be the last! How little she realised the possibility that they might never meet again until the fate of each

Digitized by Google

should be decided for eternity! It seemed as if she herself had been brought nearer to death—nearer to judgment. The vast sky grew awful in its immensity; the radiance of the declining sun, sinking slowly behind the hill, became overpowering as the symbol of that eternal light, from which no secrets of the heart can be hid. Justine! where was she? Madeline could bear the thought no longer, and she sank upon her knees in prayer.

There is peace to be found in repentance after grievous sin; in the turning of the heart to God amidst the harassing cares of middle life; in the self-dedication of the eleventh hour; but there is no peace promised, and none bestowed, so perfect, so holy, so deep and unspeakable, as the peace vouchsafed to such as 'remember their Creator in the days of their youth.' It was the blessing now granted to Madeline in her hour of darkness and trial.

Justine was gone beyond the reach of example, or warning, or prayer. That was a thought without comfort, save in the sympathy of Him who wept over Jerusalem, because it knew not the 'time of its visitation.' Alice was in danger, but Madeline could give vent to her anxious affection in earnest supplication; and trust that if the petition for life should not be granted, it would be denied only to be bestowed more fully in heaven.

Ruth had erred and Madeline was disappointed; but the Love which was the real source of every joy, and the perfection which satisfied all her wishes, could never fail—could never change; the very thought of it was rest.

The prospect of death might indeed be awful, and the idea of venturing on an unknown existence appalling. But more than fifteen years before, there had entered upon this lower world a little infant—feeble, helpless, the inheritor of a sinful nature, and—if for that reason alone—having but little prospect of happiness; it was born in the midst of suffering, exposed to ten thousand accidents of the body, liable to ten thousand evils of the soul; misery might have seemed its birthright. Yet the baby was welcomed as a precious gift from heaven; friends were waiting for it, angels were watching over it. It was tended with an unceasing love, guarded in its little cradle night and day, every want supplied, every pain soothed, every privation for its sake borne cheerfully and thankfully.

Since that hour a mighty change had passed over the child;

Digitized by Google

though an inheritor of sin, she had been made the child of God; the heir of shame had become the heir of heaven. And from the time of that change she had grown in grace as she grew in years. She had become more gentle, more humble, more trusting, loving, and earnest; weak, indeed, still,—bearing the taint of her first nature—but conscious even to herself of desires which could never by nature be her own, and a love which could find a resting-place only in the bosom of her Saviour.

When the immortal spirit of that child of God, freed from the body of sin, should enter upon the shadowy world lying between earth and heaven, could it have cause to fear? Would the love which had been so provident for its support when it was surrounded by evil, be less careful for its happiness when its home was with the saints at rest?

Madeline could no longer doubt. While she thought of the mercy which had already been vouchsafed to her, and told her fears and griefs in the ear of Him who loved her so truly, the heaviness of her heart changed into calm rest, and her forebodings for the future into cheerful hope.

'Thou shalt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusteth in Thee.'

CHAPTER LXII.

IT is at times appointed in the Providence of God that we should be brought face to face with some severe trial, forced to contemplate its every feature, taught to bend ourselves in submission to endure it; and at length when, after a long struggle, we are enabled to pray from our hearts that 'God's will may be done,' suddenly and unexpectedly comes relief.

Perhaps among the many seasons of refreshment granted us in the course of our earthly pilgrimage, there are none more perfect in enjoyment than these; foretastes, as they assuredly are, of the unspeakable rest which awaits us when 'our warfare shall be accomplished, and our iniquity pardoned,' and in the Paradise of the blest we shall be preparing to receive at the Lord's hand 'double for all our sins.'

Peace of conscience is then added to the escape from suffering; and such was the happiness enjoyed by Lady Catharine

Digitized by Google

Hyde, when, after two more days of alternate hope and fear, Alice was pronounced to be out of danger. The relief which she felt showed her for the first time all she had endured whilst believing herself not only resigned, but unutterably thankful for the softened tone of Alice's mind.

Alice was nursed now with even more devoted tenderness than before, and a tenderness which brought a full reward both to herself and Lady Catharine. The sense of having her love appreciated was all that Lady Catharine required, to bring out the feelings which sorrow and natural reserve had long chilled. And Alice began to understand what had before often perplexed her---her mother's extreme affection for Lady Catharine. The difference between the kindness shown her after her accident, and that which she experienced now, was most striking. Before, everything had been provided for her with a restrained, melancholy care, with what appeared to be the sadness of 'thoughts which do often lie too deep for tears.' It was an unapproachable affection; so sensitive that it shrank from the least touch, and was disturbed by every passing shadow. Whether Alice smiled or sighed, whether she read or worked, whether she spoke abruptly or leisurely, were differences then always marked, and very frequently commented upon; and when commented upon, of course, increasing restraint, and so augmenting the evil. The love that seeks and is doubtful of return, is a jealous, anxious, wearying spirit, preying upon itself. The love that knows itself beloved, is open, cheerful, and confiding, and hardy enough to bend to the storms and rebuffs of daily life, and spring up in vigour when they have passed. Alice was not sufficiently accustomed to examine the workings of her mind, to comprehend from whence the change arose, though she felt it hourly.

Yet the belief in mutual affection would not alone have sufficed to work the change for her happiness. It is very good for us all occasionally to have our habits broken in upon, and to be obliged to look upon life under a new aspect. It prevents our ideas from corroding, we become more alive to the feelings of others, and see ourselves and them in a more true light. Sudden events are much more useful in effecting this change than any reasoning.

The illness, which had completely interrupted Lady Catharine's ordinary train of thought, proved more efficacious than even Mr Clifford's words, in teaching her how Alice was to be treated. When she could no longer direct her every

Digitized by Google

action, and find fault with her for breaking rules, she lost in a degree the desire of doing so. Alice was often left to herself, in order to be quiet; then she began to find her own ways of amusement, and Lady Catharine was too glad to see her contented, to inquire particularly what she had been doing. Alice liked the feeling of independence more a great deal than she cared for the practice; and when she discovered that she might choose her own work, and read or write as it suited her, and employ her day very much as she fancied, she was pleased rather than not to exercise a little self-discipline, by conforming to what she knew was Lady Catharine's wish. It is not agreeable, whatever we may sometimes think, to be able to do always exactly as we like; and when persons are set free from restraint, they either form a new rule for themselves, or become restless and unhappy. True liberty is to be found in the spirit which wills what it must and ought to do; even as the most complete happiness is that service of God which is 'perfect freedom.'

But above and beyond all, the change which was now beginning to brighten Alice's life was to be found in her own heart. This was the real good, the blessing which would have supported her, even if outward circumstances had continued as untoward as before. Not that her natural disposition was altered, and that she had suddenly overcome the desire to follow her own way; or that she was not often impatient and fretful; still oftener weary when reading the Bible, and distracted when praying. Alice was Alice still. But the struggle was begun; it was no longer the inconstant effort of a heart clinging to this world, whilst feebly desiring heaven, but the steady determination that, cost what it might—be the labour of conquering her natural faults ever so arduous—she would devote herself to it in faith, and be, through God's assistance, His child, in devoted obedience, as she was by the privileges of her baptism. Alice had gazed upon death, and she could not forget it. She had looked into Eternity, believing herself about to enter it, and she knew that the same Eternity still lay before her. She was blessed in her resolutions, and yet, more blessed are they who require no such shock to startle them into consistency.

The steady, simple piety of Madeline Clifford was surely more valuable in the sight even of men, than the sincere, but irregular, unequal efforts of Alice. Alice herself felt Madeline's superiority; and Ruth now acknowledged it also—few could

Digitized by Google

have guessed how heartily. Ruth was a person to give but few external signs of feeling; or, at least, of those feelings which are peculiarly our own, those which lie open but to the eye of God. All with her now was quiet, orderly, and silent: there perhaps lay the great alteration. Ruth said much less than she had been wont to do; she was not, as before, the first to offer an opinion, or to suggest plans. What was proposed she followed out diligently, whether it was a walk, or an extra attendance at the school, or any little scheme for the day; but she had no schemes of her own. Madeline often found her partly dressed and reading, when she awoke early in the morning; and instead of working in the garden in the evening, Ruth was generally known to be sitting by herself, through the moonlight, and even in darkness, till summoned to tea. When Alice and Ruth were together there was not much conversation between them. Ruth generally preferred reading aloud. It was from Madeline that Alice learned the news which interested her, for it was from her that she heard of Mrs De Lacy, and Florence, and Agnes; that Florence had returned home according to a wish of her own, finding no pleasure in travelling after the shock she had received; and that Mrs De Lacy had given up all idea of engaging a foreign governess, and had joined some friends who were going to Switzerland for a short time. These subjects were extremely painful to Ruth, most especially, as besides reminding her of her own faults, they had brought pain and annoyance to her mother. Letters had passed between Mrs Clifford and Mrs De Lacy, explanatory of Ruth's share in the deception practised; and Ruth had read these letters, and watched the expression of her mother's face when she had to answer them, and she knew that it was shame for her which made her mamma so uneasy at the sight of the foreign postmark and paper. All this was very humbling; and in those hours of solitude Ruth thought deeply upon the conduct which had caused it; her mistakes of principle, her false judgment, her hidden pride. Solemn duties lay before her; solemn vows were to be renewed; a most holy privilege was soon to be vouchsafed to her. And now, at last, the veil was drawn aside, and she saw herself in her true light; unequal to the duties, not fully realising the vows, and unworthy—oh! how miserably unworthy—of the privilege. It was not strange that Ruth should be silent, and move with a quieter step, and sit engrossed in her own thoughts. Stillness and self-recollection were but

Digitized by Google

the necessary accompaniments of that strict preparation which was required of one who had deceived herself and deceived others.

And stillness and self-recollection are essential for us all, but in different degrees. Madeline's laugh was heard at the Parsonage, thrilling as merrily as ever on the ear; Madeline's blue eyes glanced as brightly as before; her step was still bounding and free with health and happiness, and her sweet voice sounded as the clear whisper of a ministering spirit to the weary heart of Alice, when, sometimes dispirited at a failure in a fresh endeavour to be good, or worn with the weakness of sickness, she lay exhausted on the sofa, too tired for reading and but little disposed for conversation. It was the voice of one who spoke of religion from the knowledge of its blessedness, and not the consciousness of its terrors.

'It will be so very, very nice, Alice, dear, by and by,' she said one day, as she was sitting by the side of Alice's sofa, 'when we can all go to church together again. There always seems a want now you are away, as if we were not a whole family.'

'You ought not to feel it,' said Alice, 'because you must have been accustomed to it by this time. I have not been to church for a great many Sundays.'

'But we are not accustomed to it,' replied Madeline; 'and we always think of you. Ruth and I made an agreement that we would remember you in the prayer for sick persons, till you could come to church yourself.'

'One family,' said Alice, in a musing tone. 'No, Maddy, we shall not be that for a long time to come.'

'Why not? What'— a sudden thought struck Madeline, and she paused.

'Next Wednesday is the confirmation,' said Alice, 'and the Sunday after'——

Madeline's eyes were dimmed in an instant. 'O Alice!' she exclaimed, 'I would give anything—yes, anything in the world, to have you with us there.'

'So would I,' said Alice, in a very low voice; adding directly, 'so would I—at least, if I were fit.'

'You might be wrapped up very carefully and taken in the carriage,' said Madeline.

'I do not think Lady Catharine would consent,' replied Alice. 'And there is your papa, too; he has not said anything

Digitized by Google

about it, and he cannot have a better opinion of me now than he had.'

'But I will ask him,' exclaimed Madeline, eagerly; 'I will go to him directly.

'No, Madeline; no, indeed; I will not have a word said. I could not bear him to refuse, and he cannot see any reason for it now more than there was before; and there is so little time left. No; I will wait.'

'Wait!' said Madeline; 'and perhaps be ill again.'

'Yes, perhaps,' answered Alice, despondingly; 'but it cannot be helped; it has been all my own fault.'

'But here is Ruth,' said Madeline, as her sister appeared at the door; 'just talk to her; ask her whether she does not think it possible.'

'She cannot tell,' replied Alice, 'and she knows more about me than other people do; she knows I am not fit.'

As Ruth drew near, her quick perception caught the meaning of the conversation in an instant. 'Alice may not be well enough to go to the confirmation,' she said.

There was something of coldness in her manner, and Alice looked hurt, and observed, 'I hoped, Ruth, you would have cared about it.'

Ruth made no reply. She stooped to fasten the sandal of her shoe, and Madeline saw that she could not manage it well. She offered to do it for her; but Ruth would not be helped. She kept her head bent down, and when she raised it again, began to unfasten her bonnet strings in the same nervous manner. Alice lay back on the sofa, seemingly very tired. She was playing with a rose; but her eyes were fixed upon her hands, which bore the stamp of illness almost as much as her face.

'They will not grow strong, like mine, by next Wednesday, I am afraid,' said Madeline, guessing what she was thinking.

'And it would be no good if they could,' said Alice. 'I had better not think about it.'

Madeline was going to appeal to Ruth again for her opinion; but a glance showed her that she had better not take any notice of her. 'I shall go into the garden,' she said, 'and gather some more flowers for your stand; these are quite shabby.'

Alice begged her to wait; but Madeline looked again at Ruth, and repeated her intention.

'There is a beautiful moss-rose in the middle walk,' remarked

Digitized by Google

Ruth, quietly, and Madeline took the hint and was gone directly. Then Ruth rose, and kneeling by Alice, said, in a husky voice, 'Alice, I cannot be confirmed if you are not.'

'Ruth, you!—not confirmed!' exclaimed Alice.

'No, Alice, I cannot; I must wait.'

'But I thought you did not care. I am not well enough—they will not let me be,' said Alice.

'They will let you. If they do not, I cannot go,' said Ruth. 'I could not bear it without you. Alice, I have been more wrong; I am much worse than you are; it was I who made you do things—I who encouraged it all. I could not go, and for you to be shut out! Even if I were confirmed, I could not go to the service afterwards on Sunday. I have said so to papa.'

'Have you?' exclaimed Alice, in surprise.

'Yes, and he understood. I spoke to him last night. I have thought and thought, until I could not bear thinking; and at last I went to him. He seemed to know what I felt; but he was not sure about you. He said the time was very short, and that you had not expressed any wish. He could not quite make out what you felt about it; and then he spoke of your not being well enough.'

'Yes, there is the difficulty,' said Alice.

'But it is not the real difficulty. I went to mamma this morning and asked her, and she does not think there would be much risk. She is nearly sure that Lady Catharine would be persuaded. O Alice! if I might only tell papa that you wish it!'

'To be confirmed? Yes—indeed, I wish it; but I don't know afterwards—I have not thought about it all as I ought; it frightens me.'

'But, Alice, I am frightened, and I have more cause to be than you have. It seems now as if I should never know again when I was doing right. Yet papa will let me go. Say yes, for my sake.'

'No, not for your sake,' said Alice, quickly. 'That must not be the reason.'

'Then for your own sake; because it is right.'

'Is it right?' asked Alice.

'Yes, I suppose it is—it must be. Alice, indeed, indeed I could not bear it if you were not there.'

'One must be very good afterwards,' said Alice.

Ruth was silent.

Digitized by Google

'Very much in earnest,' continued Alice.

Still Ruth kept her hands clasped together, and remained without speaking till Madeline came back with the flowers. Ruth looked round and beckoned to her. 'Tell her she must be confirmed,' she said, laying her hand upon Alice's, and looking entreatingly at Madeline.

'Not confirmed only,' said Alice. 'I could bear that; but afterwards.'

Madeline kissed her, and whispered 'It is only like going to a Father and a Brother; one ought not to be so very much afraid.'

'You did not think so once,' said Alice; 'you were frightened as I am.'

'I am frightened now,' replied Madeline; 'that is—no, not frightened, it is not the word—I was frightened at first, when I talked to papa; now it is different. It makes my heart beat; but I think of being loved, and then I am happy.'

'Hark! that is papa's voice, I am sure,' exclaimed Ruth, rising.

Mr Clifford was inquiring of Marsham if he might see Alice.

'He is come to talk to me,' exclaimed Alice, becoming much agitated.

'He said he would,' replied Ruth. 'Alice, pray listen to him.'

'But if I am not well enough—if I cannot go?'

'Papa came to the Manor with me,' said Ruth; 'but I was not to tell you. He came with mamma, too, to talk to Lady Catharine. If she said the confirmation was impossible, they were to have gone home without seeing you again; so it must be settled that you may go if you will.'

Ruth took up her bonnet and went to the door.

Madeline remained behind. 'You do wish it?' she said.

Alice did not say 'Yes;' but she kept Madeline's hand fast in hers. 'Maddy, dear, I think sometimes that if you were to say some prayers for me, I should be better. Do you think you could?'

'I do very often,' said Madeline, eagerly.

'But now, particularly, would you ask that I might have the same things you want yourself?—that I might be fit? I should like some one else to ask besides myself. You won't forget?'

Madeline's promise was understood by manner rather than by words. She made Alice drink some water, smoothed her pillows, and went out of the room, just as Mr Clifford entered it.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER LXIII.

MR CLIFFORD had held several conversations with Alice since she left her sick chamber; but they had been general. Alice was not cold, but she was still reserved; she could listen, but she could not talk. She listened now. The first beginnings of a conversation upon any particular subject are almost always awkward. Mr Clifford said he had been talking to Lady Catharine; but no notice was taken of the observation. He remarked that Alice was looking better, and she said that she felt better. Then he inquired if she had been out, and was informed that she was to go into the garden that afternoon; and whilst this was said, Alice diligently destroyed the last remnant of the rose which she had before been pulling to pieces. Mr Clifford made one or two more attempts to draw her out, and finding them unsuccessful, said at length—

'One would imagine, Alice, that you and I were strangers, instead of old friends. I wonder what we are both thinking of.'

Alice only blushed.

'I will not try to guess your thoughts,' he continued; 'though I should like you to guess mine.'

Alice looked up rather archly; but in an instant she became quite grave, and said she believed she knew them.

'Ruth has been with you,' observed Mr Clifford; 'perhaps she has given you some idea?'

'She spoke of the confirmation,' said Alice, shortly.

'I imagined she had done so. She is very anxious about it; so am I; so is Lady Catharine.'

'Lady Catharine!' repeated Alice, in a tone of surprise.

'Yes, she is anxious in two ways: both that you should go and that you should not.'

'I thought she was afraid,' said Alice.

'Yes, so she is, in a degree; but I think we could overcome her fear if'—— He paused.

Alice also was silent.

'A good deal has passed since you and I had a conversation upon the subject on the shore,' pursued Mr Clifford. 'Do you remember it well?'

'Yes, perfectly,' replied Alice; but she would add nothing besides.

Digitized by Google

Mr Clifford looked vexed. 'I had hoped your wishes were altered,' he continued; 'if they are not, there is very little to be said at present; but you must promise me, my dear child, to let me talk to you more fully before long. I think you will see the duty and necessity of taking advantage of the next early opportunity, if not of this one.' He rose, as if to go.

Alice stopped him. 'Please, don't,' she said, whilst her voice faltered. 'I think—I wish—I would much rather you should not go.'

Mr Clifford sat down again instantly.

'I could be confirmed,' exclaimed Alice, hurriedly; 'I should like it; but I could not—I am not good enough for the Holy Communion; and therefore I would rather wait entirely. I hope you understand, and will not be angry,' she added, beseechingly.

Mr Clifford answered in a tone of great kindness. 'Thank you, my love: I like to hear your difficulties. No one could be angry with you; and you know you are one of my own children. I can quite understand'——

'And agree?' exclaimed Alice.

'Not entirely that; but I think we shall agree after we have talked together a little. I am sure, Alice, now you are in earnest.'

'I hope so,' said Alice, humbly.

'I am sure you are,' repeated Mr Clifford. 'I am certain that you would like to please God.'

'Yes, very much,' replied Alice.

'Well, then, dear child, why should you wish not to do the one thing which He has especially commanded?'

'Because it is so serious—so awful,' answered Alice.

'Doubtless; no one can really tell how much so; but it is just as serious and awful for me as for you.'

'Only you are so much better,' said Alice.

'That is not the question. The blessing in itself is infinite, and the duty most solemn; but it is commanded; this is all we have to think of.'

'We must be fit,' said Alice.

'How fit—in what degree?'

Alice did not know what to reply.

'Not perfect,' said Mr Clifford; 'because in that case no human being would ever be fit. Then how good must we be? how many virtues must we possess, before we are permitted to receive the Holy Communion?'

Digitized by Google

'We must wish to have them all,' replied Alice.

'And do you not wish it? Is there any one wrong practice which you are determined to encourage?'

'No, I hope not—I will try not,' said Alice.

'Yet you are still afraid?'

'Because I am not sure of being good afterwards,' replied Alice. 'I cannot trust myself.'

'Neither can I, my love; nor can Lady Catharine; nor Madeline, nor any person that ever lived. But the Bible tells us, that however weak we may be in ourselves, yet in our Saviour we are strong. Only, Alice, our trust must be shown by actions. It can be of no use to go to a physician and say, we will do what he bids us in every case except the one which he assures us is of the greatest importance.'

'But wicked people are kept from the Holy Communion,' said Alice; 'and every one says it is very dangerous to go, if we are wicked.'

'Unquestionably. But, Alice, you are not afraid to be confirmed; you do not refuse to go before God, and promise to keep the vows of your baptism?'

'Because I mean to try and do it,' said Alice.

'Then you are not wicked; that is, not wilfully determined to do wrong. There is therefore no obstacle of that kind.'

'I only wish to be sure that I shall not go back again,' said Alice. 'But all my life I have begun things and never finished them.'

'The certainty is in your own power much more than you think,' answered Mr Clifford. 'If you remember, when we talked together upon the shore, I spoke to you a great deal about your duties; but I did not tell you how you could perform them. My wish was, I own, rather to alarm you, by showing you how many and difficult they were. I hoped by that means to rouse your fears and your energies. Now that you really feel how impossible it is to fulfil them of yourself, I should like to consider what is to be done in such a case.'

'We must pray, I know,' said Alice.

'Yes, pray diligently—just mark the word—it is a very peculiar one to use on such a subject; we should rather have said, I think, earnestly or fervently. The church says *diligently*—so also our blessed Lord declares, "That men ought always to pray and not to faint."'

'That never struck me before,' said Alice.

Digitized by Google

'Very likely not. We are often enthusiastic and excited when we give directions to others. Our Lord on the contrary is simple, clear, and, if one may be allowed to use the word without irreverence, practical. His own prayer—what can be more quiet and yet more solemn than it is?'

'It is very beautiful,' said Alice; 'but I very often think that I do not understand it.'

'We must be perfect to do that, because it is a perfect prayer. If we never were to use any other, we could still put a meaning into those words to express all our wants.'

'But we must use others,' said Alice.

'Yes; from the infirmity of our nature we require change to keep up our wandering attention. Still the Lord's Prayer is our model; and one great peculiarity which must strike us when we think about it, is its being so short and so calm.'

'I thought people were better the longer they prayed,' said Alice.

'To like our prayers, and to find a great deal to pray for, is a sign of our advancement in goodness, no doubt,' replied Mr Clifford; 'but if we are beginners in religion, we must take the instruction of beginners. Our Lord gave His disciples a prayer in few words. He himself continued all night in prayer to God.'

'Then you would not have me use long prayers,' said Alice.

'Short prayers, but frequent, my love, would be my recommendation. And this was what I wished particularly to speak to you about when you told me just now that you could not trust yourself, and that you could not be sure of going on rightly. You are, I allow, naturally very changeable; your moods vary almost every hour in the day. Now if you can bring yourself to obey a fixed rule, quite independent of your other moods—a rule for your prayers—I think it will go far towards giving you stability of character.'

'I know I must pray every morning and evening,' said Alice.

'Yes, but that is not enough. Stated prayers in the day, at stated hours, are essential for a person of your character.'

'But I am often engaged,' said Alice, 'and I can never answer for interruptions.'

'I am aware of that; but I am sure also that nothing is ever accomplished either in religion or in common business, unless we put before ourselves some paramount object to which everything else is to yield. If keeping to your fixed times of prayer

Digitized by Google

is your object, you will attain it even if you are called upon to live amidst the bustle of a London life, instead of in a retired country place.'

'But what hours? how can I manage? I shall never know how to begin,' said Alice.

'There is a rule which has been practised at different times in the Christian Church as to hours of prayer,' replied Mr Clifford; 'and it is better to keep to example than to form plans of our own. I will give you a little book of Bishop Cosins', framed for the Protestant ladies who were in exile at the court of Charles the Second, when he was in France. It has, amongst many others, prayers for the morning, evening, and for the third, sixth, and ninth hours, which are memorable as connected with our Lord's sufferings.'

'But I could not use them all,' said Alice.

'No, and I would not advise you to attempt it; at least at first. Perhaps you might find time twice in the day; we will say at the sixth hour, which is twelve o'clock, and in the evening, which would be about six. The short services would not occupy you much more than ten minutes each. When you have attended the church services in the week, you might alter them as you see fit, not to overburden yourself.'

'And if any interruptions come?'

'Still endeavour to keep as near to the time fixed as you can. It is order and habit which your mind wants, Alice; something to strengthen it.'

'But,' said Alice, 'my thoughts will never be fixed at such strange times. I shall be thinking of my work, or reading, or what I have just left off doing.'

'A Christian,' replied Mr Clifford, 'is bound to think upon God always: anything, therefore, which breaks in upon our worldly thoughts, and forces us to remember Him, must be most valuable.'

'I shall not keep the rule,' said Alice; 'I never did yet in my life keep any rule for more than a few days together.'

'Well! suppose it should be so; suppose you are tempted to break it, you can begin again. If you break it twenty times you can recommence it as often. It is not so much an effort of mind, dependent upon health and spirits, which is required at the first moment; it is an effort of the body; to rise from your seat, and leave your employment and go to your own room.'

'But,' exclaimed Alice, 'merely to do that will not be prayer.'

Digitized by Google

'No, but it will be the first step towards it; it will be obedience, and by degrees the habit will recur as an instinct; whatever you may be doing, even when travelling or in company. The very striking of the clock will be a voice summoning you to God, and you will learn to mark it by short prayers when you cannot do more.'

'I will try to do as you say,' replied Alice.

'Then, my love, I cannot have the slightest doubt of your success, and by and by your prayers will become a pleasure to you.'

Alice looked up with a smile, but said that she was afraid that would never be the case, for she always felt dissatisfied with her prayers, as if she had not prayed for the people and things she ought, even when she tried to do so.

'Perhaps the examination of the Lord's Prayer will be a help to you,' replied Mr Clifford. 'One thing it teaches us very clearly, that we are to think more of God than of ourselves. We shall see this if we study it well. We begin by calling Him "Our Father;" and as children are always interested in a Father's honour, we pray next for His glory, that "His name may be hallowed," and "His kingdom come." Afterwards there follow short petitions for ourselves: our bodily wants, the forgiveness of our sins, freedom from temptation and the snares of the evil one; and then again we recur to the thought of God's Majesty. This is not like our usual notion of what prayer should be, is it, Alice?'

'No,' answered Alice, 'and it seems impossible not to think of ourselves first.'

'The perfection of religion is love,' replied Mr Clifford; 'and a very perfect Christian loving His Saviour intensely would long that His name might be hallowed, and His kingdom come, more than for any earthly blessing. But I am not going to speak to you particularly about this now, because I think you are not likely to enter into it; and of course much of our time must be spent in confession, and asking for help. I mentioned it chiefly to suggest what we are apt to forget, that intercession should form a chief part of our prayers, because by it we promote the glory of God.'

'There are such a number of persons to pray for,' said Alice, 'I cannot remember them all, and then I grow tired and think it very troublesome.'

'Did you ever see Bishop Andrews' form of intercession?

Digitized by Google

There is one for the Wednesday which might be used in two parts at the two short services I mentioned for twelve and six o'clock. In the morning and evening you might content yourself with mentioning your particular relations and friends, and using the Lord's Prayer for all Christians. Only I would beg you to try and bring vividly before your mind the persons you are praying for; imagine them, as it were, standing by you to be interceded for. Short and numerous intercessions are apt to become a form if we do not watch ourselves. When they are real, they help us extremely in becoming charitable, and interested in persons about us.'

'But there are other things besides intercession which are difficult,' said Alice; 'remembering all our faults is one.'

'Yes, there again you require division. You have a general idea of your chief faults; perhaps it may be an assistance to you to take one of the most prominent, and make it an especial point of duty to guard against it.'

'That will be having my own way,' said Alice.

'Yes, a dislike to interference and government; this is particularly dangerous for you, my love, because it is the root of all your unhappiness with Lady Catharine. If you can once bring yourself to bend your will to hers, instead of wishing that she should bend hers to yours, your life will be very different from what it has been.'

'It will be extremely difficult, I am afraid,' said Alice.

'No doubt it will; and more so by and by than at present. Whilst you are an invalid, the object of every one is to pet you; but if it please God that you should grow strong again, you must prepare to bear the roughnesses of life.'

'Yes, I know,' said Alice, sighing.

'Then look at the case bravely, my dear child. Submission is your duty; thorough submission in all things, small as well as great, and to wishes as well as commands. Lady Catharine stands in the place of a parent. There is no duty more imperatively commanded than that of unresisting obedience to our parents.'

'I will try,' said Alice, but the tone, though sincere, was doubtful.

'Try; and yet make up your mind not to be disheartened by failures. Only keep a constant watch. When you go to your noonday prayers, for instance, look back upon what has passed since breakfast time, and see how often you have been wilful;

Digitized by Google

the recollection of one fault will bring back others; and you may inquire also whether you have been vain, idle, selfish, hasty, and so on. It will take less time than you think, and a short general confession and petition for help, perhaps only the verse of a Psalm, will, you may be sure, be accepted if sincere. So again at six o'clock, the same plan may be adopted. In that case your self-examination at night will be much easier, and you will not be induced to give it up, or hurry over it, by sleep or fatigue. You had better not give yourself more duty of the kind than you can help at night; rest, especially at your age, is very essential, and sitting up late prevents early rising, and makes the whole day go wrong.'

'Still, I shall only have a confused notion, I am afraid,' said Alice.

'Then perhaps to help you, it may not be amiss to make a memorandum of the principal faults you have noticed in yourself at these times of self-examination; only let them be made simply and shortly, without any expressions of feeling that may tend to vanity and self-consciousness, and from time to time destroyed. Perhaps it would be well to keep them for a week, and look them over every Friday, which is the day especially appointed for confession and humiliation. And, my love,' continued Mr Clifford, 'I think you will find these outward rules of use; but I hope I need not urge upon you, that if you were to begin them now, and continue them unbroken till the day of your death, they must be worse than useless without the aid of the Spirit of God and the devotion of your secret heart.'

'You have not told me about thanksgiving,' said Alice; 'but I should like to be helped in that too.'

'I have said little about it,' replied Mr Clifford, 'because it is the first part of our prayers likely to become a pleasure to us; you will soon find it make you happy to remember, besides the infinite blessings which are common to us all, the little pleasures and peculiar mercies you have enjoyed yourself in the day, and to say that you are grateful for them. It will make you realise, perhaps more than anything, that God is your Friend.'

Alice sighed deeply.

'You sigh, my dear child; you distrust yourself, why should you? or rather why should you not trust to God?'

'Because I have tried and always gone back,' said Alice.

'Then try again; pray again; above all, Alice, make up your mind to receive the Holy Communion the very first oppor-

Digitized by Google

tunity which is offered you; and never, except from absolute necessity, omit it. How greatly it will be the means of strengthening you, it will be impossible for you to imagine.'

'The service is so solemn,' said Alice. 'When I have practised the rules some time, perhaps, I shall be more fit. I am sure now I shall never feel as I ought.'

'You make the common mistake, my love, and a very great one it is. You measure fitness by feeling, and the benefits of the Holy Communion by the amount of your own goodness. God, on the contrary, sees us all unfit, all sinful. Still He says, "Come." Sorrow for the past, sincerity of purpose for the future, and an honest, childlike faith, are the wedding-garments required. If I did not think you possessed these, Alice, I should say as I did before, wait; but wait not only for the Holy Communion but for your confirmation. Do not go before God with a double mind. Do not dare to make Him a promise which in your heart you do not intend to perform.'

Alice answered humbly, 'I think I intend to perform it.'

'Then, dear child, trust that intention to God. He will keep what you commit to Him; and whenever you are inclined to be disheartened, go to Him, and commit it to Him again. I mean this literally. I could tell you, Alice, of instances in which persons with most serious natural faults—faults, perhaps, of all others, the most difficult to cure, have been placed in circumstances likely to foster them to the utmost—so much so, that any one looking at the case would say that they could not escape; and I have known the persons themselves to be actually frightened at their position, from a sense of their own powerlessness; and yet, after committing themselves entirely to God, and asking Him to save them, finding themselves saved, they knew not how; not merely enabled to battle with temptation, but in a measure unconscious of its power.'

'I know faults can be conquered,' said Alice.

'Yes, but these faults were not conquered; they remained still in the disposition, and showed themselves on other occasions, though, of course, they were carefully guarded against; but the strange thing is, that in the peculiar case in which the danger seemed so imminent, they were comparatively unfelt. These instances are as plain answers to prayer, as clear interpositions of God in our behalf, as the curing of a physical disease would be. I mention them just to show what help you have at hand at all moments. The very instability of your

Digitized by Google

disposition may be converted into a blessing, if it should teach you to throw yourself more fully upon God.'

Alice looked happier and more hopeful; yet she could not bring herself to say what Mr Clifford wished. He asked her again whether she could now agree to his proposal. She would think, she said; she would let him know.

'But, my love, are there any more reasons? Is there anything you have not told me?'

'No, nothing, except'——

'Except what?'

'Except that I am afraid, and that I shall not keep my thoughts properly fixed, and that my feelings are always so cold in church; everything distracts me.'

'Very likely; some persons do find it more difficult to keep up their attention properly in church than in private; these are individual peculiarities; they do not affect the great question of our sincerity.'

'But it will be very wicked not to attend then?' said Alice.

'Not to try to attend, and not to care about it would be very wicked,' replied Mr Clifford; 'but you must be prepared to find your thoughts wander; it may be even more than usual when you are to engage for the first time in such a very solemn service. The sense of novelty—the uncertainty as to what you are exactly to do—physical nervousness—all these things will tend to disturb you—perhaps to make you quite cold; but these are not true tests of our condition or our acceptance. And when you are conscious of them, do not try to work yourself up to a state of excitement; pray that you may be assisted; and instead of thinking of yourself, think of your Saviour; think of those parts of the Gospel which speak of His sufferings, and endeavour, if you can, to realise them, or read some of the prophetical Psalms; go out of yourself as much as you can, try to forget whether you are feeling much or little; and remember the question for self-examination will be, how you endeavour to prepare for your infinite privilege; to keep up the remembrance of it, and to struggle against your faults afterwards. The first little act of self-denial when you return home, done with a special remembrance that you have been a partaker of the Holy Communion, will, as it were, stamp the act upon your heart.

'And when I have to go again, I shall never think I have prepared myself properly,' said Alice.

'You will find the preparation comparatively easy; if you

Digitized by Google

can keep steadily to the rules I mentioned just now,' said Mr Clifford. 'Self-examination will be a light task when it is so constantly performed; though it will be right, at such seasons, to take a larger view of your conduct, and see if you can discover any marked progress from one month to another. You may also read with attention particular parts of the Bible, such as our Saviour's sermon on the mount, St Paul's exhortations to the Romans, in the 12th chapter of his epistle; or to the Ephesians, in the 4th, 5th, and 6th chapters; or again, the description of charity in the 13th chapter of the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, and compare your conduct with the laws laid down in them. But I do not advise you to add very much to your usual reading and prayers at these times. I think you would find it better rather to make alterations in those to which you are accustomed. Instead, for instance, of using the short services exactly as they are put down in Bishop Cosins' Devotions, to choose other psalms, or to fix upon other prayers more peculiarly suitable; remembering that although it is most needful to recollect our own offences, it is quite as much, if not more so, to dwell upon the mercy purchased for us by our Saviour's sufferings. The more we can think of Him, the safer and happier we shall be. I do not mean to imply from what I have said, that special, lengthened preparation is not good. When persons have but little leisure for devotion generally, it is most necessary; but I would rather spread your preparation over a longer space of time;—in fact, teach you to feel that you were always prepared.'

'Or never prepared,' said Alice, with a faint smile.

'Never prepared,' repeated Mr Clifford, emphatically. 'You are right, Alice; it is "never prepared;" that we must feel more and more. But, my love, we stand upon the same ground there. Have you anything else to say?'

'Nothing; not that I can remember, only'——

'Only you will consent, my own dear child; you will not draw back again?' Alice held out her hand in token of assent. He took it in one of his, and laying the other upon her head, said: 'May God bless you and keep you, my child; and give you peace both now and evermore.'

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE deep-toned bells of Laneton Church pealed joyfully on the morning of the confirmation. Early, quite early, when the sun had but lately risen upon the earth, they poured forth their hallowed greeting, summoning many a young heart to wake from the dreams of earth, and prepare for the warfare of eternity.

Ruth was among the first to rise—to remember that a solemn day at length was come, and to make an effort for its proper celebration. And Madeline had no wish to linger in indolence. The watchword for that day, and for the whole future of their lives, was to be—energy. 'Whatsoever thy heart findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave whither thou goest.' It was a quiet, silent energy which was required now; to keep in mind the remembrance of the vows they were about to renew; and to prevent their thoughts from being distracted by the unusual excitement in the village, by the arrival of the bishop, and all the attendant interest of a ceremony comparatively rare. These are the real trials of all such occasions, and Ruth was pained to find how much they disturbed her. But all was forgotten, when at length she found herself with Madeline in the church, and no longer called upon to give heed to anything save the duty before her. One thought alone drew her attention occasionally aside, when her eye wandered to a distant spot, where Alice sat apart, leaning against a cushion, and supported by Lady Catharine.

Poor Alice! she looked very ill on that morning, but she did not cry; and she sat perfectly still, without once looking up. She seemed scarcely to have the power to seek for herself a blessing; only she was humble, and penitent, and willing to receive it. The sight of her caused Ruth a sharp pang. All her mistakes and errors rose up before her with renewed self-reproach; and when she thought of the promise to be made, her heart misgave her with the doubt whether it could ever be performed. But it was too late then to draw back, and Ruth did not really wish it. She was learning to trust herself to a Higher Power; to trust as simply as Madeline, whose face bore the grave but exquisitely sweet expression of one about to be placed in a position of new and untried responsibility, and full

Digitized by Google

of resolution and hope, because loving too much to fear that she should ever be forsaken.

Yes; it is pleasant, it is a real happiness, to bow ourselves to the service of One to whom our hearts are given. If there is delight in the devotion of a wife to her husband; if there is a proud satisfaction in loyalty, or a pure enthusiasm in patriotism; surely also, there is a higher, a more ennobling happiness in offering ourselves to our Saviour, in pledging ourselves to be the faithful soldiers and servants of Christ, even to our life's end.

The service proceeded, differing but little from the usual form. A short question was asked, a still shorter answer given—and the act was over.

So it is often in this world; we speak for a moment—we promise for eternity. Then Ruth, and Madeline, and Alice, knelt together to be blessed! And what a blessing it was which they received! Strengthening and inspiriting; full of hope for a daily increase of happiness upon earth—of rest in the eternal kingdom of glory. Ruth's tears fell fast but peacefully. The prospect of heavenly aid was the only trust of a contrite spirit. And Alice's hands shook as she held by the altar rail, trying to understand where she was, and what she was doing; and whilst distressed at her bewildered feelings, still satisfied with the sense of performing a duty; and Madeline, self-possessed in manner and tranquilly happy, forgot her own powerlessness as the eagerness of fervent resolution melted into the quiet rest of undoubting faith.

When the service was ended, Alice was carried back to the Manor, watched with inexpressible tenderness by Lady Catharine; and Ruth and Madeline returned to the Parsonage, to receive that warm, fond kiss of a parent's love, the remembrance of which, when the reality is beyond our reach, we must bear with an aching longing to our grave.

They spent the evening together at the Manor. Ruth and Madeline were alone with Alice when the clock struck nine. They had fallen into a conversation which interested them—a recollection of school days. Ruth noticed the hour, and Madeline said she could not have imagined it half as late. Alice rose instantly.

'Good night, dears,' she said. 'I must go. It is my bed-time now, till I get well.'

'Must you, indeed?'

Digitized by Google

'Yes; Lady Catharine wishes it.'

No one said a word more. Alice put on her shawl, and went to find Lady Catharine. She met her on the stairs.

'I was coming to look for you, my love. I did not like to disturb you; but it is best to be particular.'

'I heard the clock strike,' said Alice, 'and I knew it would be best to go. I came to wish you good night.'

'Dear child! it seems very hard you should be interrupted; but you must grow strong again.'

'It is not so very hard,' said Alice; 'and I like to please you,' she added, as she held up her face to be kissed.

'And what did Ruth and Madeline say?' asked Lady Catharine, whilst she wrapped Alice's shawl more closely round her throat, to keep her from the draught on the stairs.

'Nothing, when they knew it was right.'

Lady Catharine smiled and answered, 'God bless you, my child, and them too!' and Alice went away.

Sunday came—bright as the day of confirmation; but quiet, like other Sundays. Some days and some feelings are not to be described. Words are human and imperfect; feelings, the purest and the best are the gift of the Spirit of God.

If sincerity and humbleness of heart are acceptable in the sight of heaven, then were Alice, and Ruth, and Madeline accepted when they knelt to receive their first communion. It was a moment full of deep awe—of a sense of incomprehensible mercy—of hopes scarcely understood—of privileges too great to be realised; a season, the blessedness of which was perceived in remembrance, rather than in its reality.

Others, more advanced in their Christian course, could better comprehend it—at least, could be more grateful for it—most especially the parents, who then saw themselves bound to their precious children by the most hallowed of all ties; and she, the widow, once desolate, who read in that solemn act the pledge that the one treasure of her life should be hers for ever in heaven.

'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.'

Digitized by Google

Ruth, and Madeline, and Alice, were now fully Christians. They were to begin life for themselves.

We may think that it would be well to follow them farther; we may desire to know how it fared with them in that long and dangerous journey; we may feel some wish to know the period of their probation upon earth; and where, after the toil and the conflict were ended, they were laid to rest in their last calm sleep.

But the future is sometimes to be read by the past, not indeed perfectly, yet sufficiently. They who give themselves to God in their youth will be protected by Him to their old age. We may picture Alice to ourselves as still struggling against the inherent faults of her character; sometimes fretted by interruption, sometimes inclined to rebel against authority; but we may be certain that the principle within must rise superior to all such evil; and we may imagine the Manor to be still occasionally dull, and Lady Catharine inclined to be strict, but love and obedience will, by degrees, melt even the most firmly fixed habits, and Lady Catharine Hyde's deep affection, and consciousness of her own imperfection, might well be trusted to ensure Alice's happiness.

And at the Parsonage,—with Mr and Mrs Clifford, and Madeline, and Ruth,—it can scarcely be difficult to prophesy something of the course of after years. We may surely foresee the unwearying energy with which Ruth would labour to correct her hidden faults; how she would pray, and strive, and watch; and when overtaken by sin, repent and strive again; and pursue the straightforward path, under the remembrance of the time when, in bygone years, she had wandered from it into error; and how the clear stream of Madeline's Christian life would flow onwards to the end, even as it had so early begun, disturbed, it might be, for one moment, by the pollutions of earth, but the next reflecting untroubled the hues of heaven.

Such as they were in life, such would they be in death. May God in His mercy grant that the history of their early years shall not have been written in vain.

THE END.

PRINTED BY BALLANTYNE, HANSON AND CO.
LONDON AND EDINBURGH

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google



STANFORD UNIVERSITY
3 6105 00021 4135

DATE DUE			

STANFORD UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305-6004



Digitized by Google